To Have and to Lose

by

Chingiz Aitmatov

Translated by

Olga Shartse

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IN PLACE OF PROLOGUE

My newspaper work often took me to the Tien Shan region. One day in spring, about eighteen months ago, when I was in Naryn, a regional centre. I received an urgent summons to my head office. I missed the bus by a matter of minutes, and the next one was not due for about five hours. The only thing to do was to try to get a lift, and so I walked to the highway on the outskirts of the little town.

As I turned the corner I saw a lorry parked in front of a filling station. The driver had evidently filled up because he was screwing on the cap of his petrol tank. That was a lucky break. On the wind-screen were the letters SU-Soviet Union-which meant that the lorry was running on an international route. It was probably on its way from China to Rybachye, to the IT (International Transport) depot, from where it would be easy to get to Frunze.

"Are you starting right now?" I asked the driver. "Could you give me a lift to Rybachye?"

He turned and stared at me silently over his shoulder, then straightened up.

"No, *agai*, I can't," he said calmly.

"Sure you can't? I've been urgently summoned to Frunze, it's very important."

The driver gave me another sullen look.

"I understand, *agai*, and I'm sorry, but I can't take anyone."

I was puzzled. There was room in the cab, so why couldn't he help me out?

"I'm a journalist. My business is very urgent. I'll pay anything you ask."

"Money's got nothing to do with it, *agai*," he cut me short, and gave the front tyre a vicious kick. "Another time I'd take you for nothing. But just now.... I can't. Don't hold it *agai*nst me. More of our lorries will be along soon, any of them will take you, but I can't."

He was obviously reserving the front seat for someone he had to pick up on the road.

"What about riding behind?" I asked.

"No. I'm very sorry, *agai*."

He glanced at his watch with a worried frown.

I was completely baffled. I shrugged my shoulders and looked questioningly at the station attendant, an elderly Russian woman who had been watching the scene in silence from her little window. She shook her head as much as to say: "Don't bother him, leave him alone." Very strange, I thought.

The driver got into the cab, put a cigarette in his mouth and, without lighting it, started the engine. He was thirty or so, a tall man with a slight stoop. I was struck by his big, strong hands gripping the wheel, and his eyes with the wearily drooping lids. Before putting in the clutch, he rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, sighed and peered up the mountain road with something like apprehension.

He drove off.

"Don't Worry, there'll be other lorries along soon," the filling station attendant said as she came out.

I said nothing.

"He's got trouble, that poor chap. It's a long story... He used to live here once, at the trans-shipping base..."

I had no chance to hear the story, for just then a Pobeda came along.

We only caught up with the lorry near the Dolon pass. It was going far too fast, even for one of the Tien Shan demon drivers. Without slowing down at the bends, the lorry roared under the overhanging rocks, leaped up the rises, dived headlong into the valleys, and instantly reappeared ahead of us, the ends of its tarpaulin cover flapping against the sides.

We overtook it, and I glanced round, wondering what furies were driving that man, where was he going at such breakneck Speed? A hailstorm started suddenly, the way it often does in mountain passes. In the slanting, lashing streams of rain and hailstones I saw the driver's pale, tense face. I saw his hands turning the wheel confidently and quickly. There was no one else in the lorry.

Shortly afterwards I was sent to the south of Kirghizia, to Osh Region. As is usually the case in our job, I had to catch the train at a moment's notice. I raced to the station just in time to jump aboard, and when I found my compartment I did not immediately notice my travelling companion. He sat facing the window and did not turn round even when the train had picked up speed.

Over the radio came a tune I knew, played on the *komuz*. It was a Kirghiz song which always made me think of a lonely horseman riding through the twilit steppe. He has a long journey before him, the steppe is vast, he can think at leisure and softly sing a song, sing of what is in his heart. A man has many things to think over when he is alone, when the only sound in the stillness about him is the rhythmic thud of his horse's hoofs. The strings of the *komuz* rang gently, like water rippling over smooth, clean stones. The komuz sang of the sun setting behind the hills, of the

cool blueness sweeping stealthily over the ground, and of the wormwood and the yellow feather grass stirring and swaying, shedding their pollen on the sun-baked road. The steppe would listen to the rider, think and sing with him...

Perhaps that rider had followed this very trail once upon a time... And like us, he saw the glow of the setting sun fading on the distant edge of the steppe, gradually turning a pale yellow, and he saw the snow on the mountain tops catching the parting rays of the sun, turning pink for a moment and quickly paling.

We travelled past orchards, vineyards, and fields of dark green maize. A two-horse cart loaded with freshly-cut lucerne was trundling towards the level crossing. It drew up before the barrier. The driver, a sunburnt youngster in a ragged vest and rolled up trousers, stood up in the cart and, smiling, waved to the passing train.

The tune blended beautifully with the rhythm of the moving train. Instead of the thudding of the horse's hoofs, I heard the knocking of the wheels. My companion sat leaning on the small table, shielding his face with his hand. I fancied that he, too, was soundlessly singing the song of the lonely rider. He was either brooding or daydreaming, I could not tell which, but there was something sad about him, a sorrow that would not be dispelled. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not notice my presence. I tried to get a better look at his face. Now where had I seen him before? Even his hands were familiar-strong, sunburnt hands, with long, bony fingers.

And then I remembered: it was the lorry driver who had refused me the lift that day. I worried no more about it and got out a book to read. Why bring it up? He must have long forgotten all about it. After all, lorry drivers can't remember everybody they meet on the road.

The day wore on and we did not speak. It was

growing dark. The man took out a packet of cigarettes and sighed heavily before striking a match. He then raised his head, looked at me with surprise and blushed a quick red. He had recognised me.

"It's you, *agai*," he said with a guilty smile.

I offered him my hand.

"Going far?" I asked.

"Yes, very far," he exhaled slowly and after a pause added: "To the Pamirs."

"Oh, the Pamirs? Then we're going the same way. I'm off to Osh. Going on leave or is it a transfer?"

"Yes, sort off... Have a cigarette."

We sat smoking in silence. There seemed nothing more to say. The man was brooding again. He sat swaying with the movement of the train, his head dropped on his chest. I found a great change in him since that encounter of ours. He was thinner, his face was drawn, there were three deep, straight lines across his forehead, and the shadow of a perpetual frown on his face.

"I suppose you were offended that day, *agai*?" he suddenly asked with a rueful smile.

"When? I don't seem to remember," I said, to spare him any embarrassment, but his look was so earnest that I had to admit that I did remember the incident. "Oh, that time... It's all right. I'd forgotten all about it. All sorts of things happen on the road. But why should you remember?"

"Normally I wouldn't, but that particular day..."

"What happened? Not an accident, I hope?"

"No, I wouldn't call it an accident," he said slowly, and then he laughed, or rather forced a laugh. "I'd take you anywhere you wanted now, only you see I'm a passenger myself."

"A horse steps in the same hoof mark a thousand times, so maybe we'll meet again some place."

"If we do, I'll drag you into the cab," he said with a toss of his head.

"It's a deal, eh?"

"It's a promise, agai," he said, cheering up.

"Tell me anyway, why wouldn't you take me that time?"

"Why?" he repeated, and his face darkened. He fell silent, and drew on his cigarette furiously. I realised that I ought not to have asked that question, but did not know how to right the situation. Stubbing out his cigarette, he answered, with an obvious effort.

"I couldn't," he said. "I was taking my son for a ride."

"Your son?"

"It was like this, you see... I don't know how to explain it to you." He lit another cigarette and, overcoming his emotion, looked me straight in the face, earnestly and resolutely.

And he told me his story.

We had plenty of time, the train takes almost two full days to get to Osh, and I neither hurried him nor bothered him with questions. It's good for a man to relive his story, to reflect on the words, pausing now and again. And it took all my self-control not to cut into his narrative. For I suddenly discovered that chance and my restless profession had given me some inside information about him personally and the people he was telling me about. I could have filled in the gaps in his story and explained a lot of things, but I decided to let him finish first. But then I gave up the idea altogether. And I am sure I did the right thing. Let the heroes tell their own story.

THE DRIVER'S STORY

It was all very sudden. It happened soon after I was demobbed. I had served in the motorised units, and before that I had worked as a lorry driver after finishing ten-year school. I was brought up in an orphanage. My friend Alibek Djanturin was demobbed a year earlier and he had a job at the Rybachye motor

depot. Well, I went and joined him. Alibek and I had always dreamed of seeing the Tien Shan or the Pamirs. The motor depot people received me well. They put me up in a hostel and gave me a practically brand-new ZIL with not a dent on it and you know, I loved that machine as if it were a human being. It was one of the best models. And it had powerful engine. True, I didn't always have a chance to take on a full load. Not on the Tien Shan motor road, it's one of the highest in the world, all gorges, ridges and passes. There's any amount of water up in the mountains, but still we always take some along. You may have noticed the wooden cross-piece we have on the front corner of the body, with an inner tube dangling from it; well, it's filled with water. That's because the engine gets terrifically overheated on the twists and turns. And you don't carry too much of a load either. Myself too, I used to rack my brains at first, trying to figure out how bigger loads could be carried. But it seemed that nothing could be done about it. Mountains will always be mountains.

I liked my job. And I liked the country, too. Our depot was practically on the shore of Issyk-Kul. When foreign tourists came there and stood on the lake shore gaping for hours and hours, I used to think with pride: "That's our Issyk-Kul! Try and find something to beat it for beauty!"

There was just one thing that was not to my liking when I first joined the depot. It was spring, a busy time for the collective farms which were building and expanding. They were making a good job of it, but they had too few lorries of their own, and so some of ours were assigned to help the farms out. The newcomers, particularly, were always being chased there and back. Me, too, of course. I'd just get settled doing long runs when, bang, they'd take me off and send me from one village to the next again. I knew it had to be done, but after all I'm a driver, and I felt as deeply for my ZIL, as if it were myself who had to

wade knee-deep through the mud and take all the jolts. The roads there are a nightmare....

Well, one day I was driving to a collective farm--I had to deliver some roofing slate for the new cowshed they were building. The village is at the foot of a mountain and the road to it goes across the steppe. It wasn't so bad, the road was already drying up and I'd got to within a stone's throw of the village, when suddenly I got stuck driving across a ditch. The road that spring was so churned up by our wheels that a camel could have got drowned there and never been found. I tried this and I tried that, but it was all no good. The mud held the wheels like a vice, I was stuck really good and hard. Besides, in exasperation, I had jerked the steering wheel so far that something went wrong, and so I had to crawl under the lorry to see what it was. There I was sweating away in my mud bath, cursing the road up hill and down dale, when suddenly I heard footsteps. From where I was all I could see was a pair of rubber boots. The boots came closer, stopped and stood there. That got my back up: I was no performing clown to stand and gape at.

"Keep going, don't bother me," I called out. Out of the comer of my eye I saw the hem of a skirt, a shabby old skirt spattered with manure. Some old crone wanting a lift to the village, I decided.

"You'll have to walk, Granny," I said. "This is going to take me all day, it's no use waiting."

"I'm not a granny," she said with a stammer or a giggle, I wasn't sure.

"What are you then?" I asked angrily.

"I'm a girl."

"A girl?" I glanced at her boots, and then asked just for the hell of it, "A pretty girl?"

The boots shuffled a bit and made a step to go. So I quickly crawled out from under the lorry. She really was pretty. A slim young girl with sternly drawn brows, a red kerchief on her head and a man's large jacket, probably her father's, round her shoulders.

She looked at me without speaking. I must have been a sight, squatting there covered in mud and grease.

"Not bad! You *are* pretty!" I grinned. "If only you had pretty shoes on," I teased as I got to my feet.

She turned abruptly and without a glance hurried down the road.

What was the matter with her? Had I hurt her feelings? I hoped not. I started after her but thought better of it; I collected my tools in a hurry and jumped into the cab. I began to rock the lorry, jerking the gears from bottom to reverse. My only thought was to catch up with her. The engine roared, the lorry shook and swayed, but it would not budge. And she was getting farther and farther away. As the wheels skidded, I yelled to no one particular: "Let go! Let go, I tell you! D'you hear me?"

I pressed my foot down on the accelerator with all my might, the lorry groaned and began to crawl, and miraculously it got free. What a relief! Going at a good speed, I wiped the mud off my face with a handkerchief and smoothed down my hair. Coming level with the girl I slowed down and, sprawling across the seat, flung the door open with a flourish. The free and easy familiarity came as a surprise to myself.

"Your car, madam," I said, and made an inviting gesture.

The girl did not stop, but walked on taking no notice. That took all the dash out of me. I caught up with her again, and this time I said:

"I'm sorry, honestly. I didn't mean it... Get in."

But the girl ignored me.

So then I drove ahead of her and parked the lorry across the road. I jumped down, ran around to the right-hand side, opened the door and stood there, my hand on the handle. She came up, a wary look in her eyes as if to say, what would the nuisance do next? I said nothing; I simply stood there and waited. She either took pity on me or perhaps didn't give it a

thought, one way or the other, but anyway she shook her head and without a word got into the cab.

We drove off.

I couldn't think of anything to say. Talking to girls was nothing new to me, of course, but for some reason I was tongue-tied just then. I wondered why. So I kept my eyes glued to the road and only stole a glance at her now and then. Her black hair lay on her neck in soft ringlets. The jacket had slipped down, she was holding it up with her elbow, and she sat as far away from me as possible, afraid to brush against me. Her eyes had a stern look, but she was sweet-natured, I was sure, it was written all over her. She wanted to frown, but couldn't manage it. She glanced at me stealthily too. Our eyes met. She smiled. And that gave me enough pluck to say something.

"Why did you stop beside the lorry when I was fixing it?"

"I wanted to help you," she answered.

"You did!" I laughed. "You really did help me, you know. If it hadn't been for you I'd have been there all day... Do you always go this way?"

"Yes, I work on the farm."

"Oh, good!" I said brightly, but checked myself at once. "Good road this." And at that very moment we got such a jolt that we banged shoulders. I grunted, and she laughed at my red face. And I too burst out laughing.

"I didn't want to come to the farm, you know," I confessed, still laughing. "If I'd known I was going to find a helper like you on the road, I wouldn't have argued with the dispatcher. Ah, Ilyas, Ilyas!" I said with reproach. "Ilyas, that's me," I told her.

"And I'm Asel."

We were getting near the village and the road was smoother. The wind tore into the cab, pulling at Asel's kerchief and mussing her hair. We were silent and enjoyed it. I discovered that you could be happy and light-hearted because there was someone sitting

beside you, almost touching elbows with you, someone you knew nothing of an hour before, but who was all you could think about now... I don't know what Asel felt, but there was a smile in her eyes. I wished we could drive on and on and never have to part. That's what I was dreaming of then. But we were already driving down the village street.

"Stop, I'll get out here," Asel exclaimed anxiously.

"Is this where you live?" I asked, putting on the brakes.

"No, but I'd better get out here," she looked somehow flustered and worried.

"What on earth for? I'll drive you right up to the door," I said and drove on before she could say no.

"Please stop here," Asel begged. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I muttered, and added, not really joking: "Supposing I get stuck in the same place tomorrow will you come and help?"

Before she could reply, the gate flew open and an elderly, very excited woman came running out.

"Asel!" she shouted, but instantly clapped her hand over her mouth. "Where have you been? May the Almighty punish you! Go and change quickly, the match-makers are here."

Asel looked confused, she dropped the jacket, picked it up, then obediently followed her mother. At the gate she turned round and looked at me, but the gate was quickly banged shut. And only then did I notice the steaming saddled horses at the tethering post. I looked over the mud wall. Some women were busy at the hearth in the yard. Smoke came pouring from the funnel of a large copper samovar. Two men were dressing a sheep under a shed. Yes, they were receiving the matchmakers according to all the rules here. There was nothing for me to do. I still had to go and unload.

The day was almost over when I got back to the depot. I washed down my machine and put it in the garage. I pottered around there a long time, finding

lots of things that needed doing. Why was I taking it all so much to heart? It beat me. All the way to the depot I kept reasoning with myself: "What's eating you anyway? What sort of a fool are you? After all, what is she to you? Your girl? Your sister? You met her by chance on the road and gave her a lift, so what? And yet you're as cut up as if you were lovers! Maybe she couldn't care less for you. You don't mean a thing to her. She has a lawful fiancé and you're no one. One can't remember all the drivers one meets on the road. You've no right to hope for anything. People are getting engaged, there's going to be a wedding, so where do you come in? Chuck it. Stick to your steering wheel and mind your own business."

But the trouble was that no matter what I said to myself I couldn't stop thinking of Asel.

There was nothing else I could do in the garage. I could have gone to the hostel, it was a lively, noisy place, we had a recreation room too, but no, I wanted to be alone. I lay on the mudguard, my hands behind my head. Nearby Djantai, another driver of ours, was tinkering with his lorry. He poked his head out of the pit and chuckled.

"What are you daydreaming about, *djigit*?"

"Money," I snapped back.

I didn't like him. A proper money-grubber he was. A sly and envious character. He would not live with us in the hostel but rented a room from some woman. There was talk that he had promised to marry her, it would make him a house-owner if nothing else.

I turned my back on him. Out in the yard our fellows had started a scuffle near the water tap. One of them was standing on the roof of his cab, spraying water from the hose over the waiting drivers. Everyone was roaring with laughter. It was a powerful jet, a direct hit would knock you off balance. They were trying to pull the fellow down, but he just danced about on the roof, levelling the hose like a tommy-gun at the men, and knocking off their caps.

Suddenly the jet arched upwards, sparkling like a rainbow. What was he up to? I had a look and saw Kadicha, our dispatcher, standing there. That one wouldn't scream and run. Kadicha knew that all the men eyed her admiringly. Sure of herself and dignified, she was no easy game. There she stood now, cool and calm. You won't dare, you haven't the guts, her look seemed to say. Her mouth full of hairpins, she laughed softly as she unconcernedly fixed her hair. A fine, silvery spray fell on her. The fellows laughed and egged on the one with the hose.

"Give her one in the rear!"

"Knock her over!"

"Look out, Kadicha!"

The chap didn't dare and just fooled about with the jet. If I'd been him, I'd have doused her from head to foot and probably she wouldn't have minded, she'd have simply laughed it off. She treated me differently from the others, I always noticed, she was less standoffish, even a little naughty. She liked it when I flirted with her and stroked her hair. And what I liked about her was that although she was always quarrelling and arguing with me, she was quick to give in, even when she was in the right. Occasionally I took her to the pictures and walked her home afterwards, it was on my way to the hostel. I always went straight into her office, while other people were only allowed to talk to her through the little window.

But just then I wasn't interested in her. Let them have their fun.

Kadicha stuck the last of her hairpins in her hair.

"Enough fooling, stop it," she ordered.

"Yes, sir," the chap with the water hose raised his hand in mock salute. He was then dragged down amid roars of laughter.

Kadicha came into the garage. She stopped beside Djantai's lorry and seemed to be looking for someone. She did not see me at first because of the wire screen dividing the garage into compartments. Djantai poked

his head out of the pit again and called out familiarly: "Hello, beautiful!"

"Oh, it's you, Djantai..."

He leered at her legs, grinning. She shrugged in annoyance.

"Stop ogling," she said, and kicked him lightly on the chin.

Anyone else would have taken offence, but not Djantai. He beamed as though she had kissed him, and dived back into the pit.

And then she saw me.

"Relaxing, Ilyas?"

"It's as soft as a feather bed."

She pressed her face to the screen and looked at me intently.

"Come into the office," she said very quietly.

"All right."

She went away. As I got up to go, Djantai's head popped out again.

"There's a juicy piece for you!" he said with a meaningful wink.

"Yeah, but not for you," I said pointedly.

I thought he'd resent that and start a fight. Fighting is not my idea of fun, but I felt so down-hearted, even that would have been a relief.

However, Djantai was not offended in the least.

"Never mind," he muttered. "We'll wait and see."

There was no one in the office. What the devil? Where was she? I turned to go and almost collided with Kadicha. She was leaning against the door, her head thrown back. There was a gleam in her half-closed eyes. Her hot breath scorched my face. It was too much for me. I strained towards her, but instantly drew back. It was strange, but I had a feeling that I was being unfaithful to Asel.

"What did you want to see me about?" I asked, frowning.

Kadicha looked at me in silence.

"Well?" I persisted impatiently.

"You're not too friendly, I notice," she said in a hurt tone. "Or perhaps someone else has caught your fancy?

I was disconcerted. Why should she reproach me? How had she found out?

The window latch banged. Djantai's head appeared. There was a smirk on his face.

"If you'll be so kind, comrade dispatcher," he drawled nastily and handed Kadicha a paper.

She took it, giving him an angry look.

"And who's going to take your orders for you?" she snapped at me. "D'you expect a special invitation or what?"

Pushing me aside, she quickly strode to her desk.

"Here," she said, handing me my route form.

I looked at it. The same collective farm. My heart sank: how could I go there, knowing that Asel... And anyway why should I be chased from farm to farm more often than anyone else?

"Farms again?" I exploded. "Manure and bricks again? I'm not going." I threw the paper on her desk "I've had enough of wallowing in mud, let the others get a taste of those roads for a change."

"No need to shout. You have your orders for a week. If I have to I'll make it longer," Kadicha was really angry.

"I'm not going," I said very calmly.

Suddenly, as was her way, Kadicha gave in.

"All right. I'll talk to the chief," she said, picking up the form.

"So I'm not going," I thought, "and I'll never see Asel again." I felt even worse. I'd regret it all my life, that much was clear to me. All right, I'd go, come what may.

"Here, give it to me," I said, snatching the form out of Kadicha's hands.

Djantai giggled.

"Remember me to your grandmother," he said.

I didn't say anything. God, how I wanted to sock

him one! I banged out of the office and went to the hostel.

* * *

The next day I kept looking out for her on the road. Would I see her, my pretty poplar in a red kerchief? My steppeland poplar? A pretty poplar indeed, you'll say, in her rubber boots and her father's jacket! All the same, I know what she's like.

What was there about her to have stirred me so?

Driving on, I kept watching out for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. When I got to the village I slowed down at her gate. Maybe she was at home? But how could I call her out, what would I say to her? No, fate seemed to be against my meeting her: I stepped on the juice and went on to unload. My one hope was to see her on the way back. But I didn't. And then I turned off the road and drove to her dairy farm. It was a good way off the main road, quite a distance from the village. I spoke to the first girl I saw there. No, Asel had not come to work that day. "She didn't want to meet me on the road, that's why she stayed away from work," I decided, and the thought hurt. I was feeling pretty low when I got back to the depot.

The following morning I took the same road again. I was no longer hoping to see her. Honestly, what good was I to her, why bother a girl who's engaged? I couldn't quite believe, though, that it would all end there; after all, in our villages parents try to marry off their daughters against their will to this day. I've read about it hundreds of times in the papers. So what? It's no use crying over spilt milk, they'll marry her off, it won't be simple to undo it, her life will have been ruined... Those were the sort of thoughts crowding into my mind...

It was the height of spring. The foot-hills were

carpeted with flame-red tulips. I've loved tulips since I was a child. I felt like picking an armful and taking them to her. But where was I to find her...

And suddenly there she was--Asel. I couldn't believe my eyes. She was sitting on a boulder at the side of the road, at the very spot where I got stuck that first time. She seemed to be waiting for someone. I drove up. She jumped to her feet, startled and confused, tugged at kerchief and crumpled it in her hand. This time she was wearing a pretty dress and fancy shoes. High heels too, and all that way to go. I jammed on the brakes, my heart in my throat.

"Hello, Asel."

"Hello," she replied in a low voice.

I wanted to help her into the cab, but she turned away and started slowly down the road. So she wouldn't get in. Leaving the door open, I drove along beside her. That's how we went on for some time--she walking along the edge of the road, and me behind the wheel. We didn't speak. What was there to say?

"Did you go to the dairy farm yesterday?" she asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. You mustn't go there."

"I wanted to see you."

She gave no reply.

Those blasted matchmakers were worrying me. I was dying to find out how things stood. But I didn't dare ask, I was scared. Scared of hearing her answer.

Asel turned and looked at me.

"Is it true?" I asked.

She nodded. The wheel shook in my hands.

"When is the wedding to be?"

"Soon," she answered softly.

Drive on, anywhere, but do it fast! But instead of the accelerator I stepped on the clutch. As the engine revved idly Asel sprang out of the way. I did not even beg her pardon. I was past that.

"So we're not going to see each other again?" I asked

"I don't know. It's best not to."

"And I... I'll go on trying to see you anyway."

We fell silent again. Perhaps we were thinking the same thoughts, though we kept apart, as if there was an invisible wall preventing me from leaving my wheel, going over to her, and her from getting into the cab beside me.

"Asel, don't try to avoid me. I shan't bother you. I'll keep my distance and just look on. Promise?"

"I don't know. Maybe..."

"Get in, Asel."

"No. You'd better go. Here's the village now."

After that, we met on the road a few times, accidentally as it were. We "walked" in the same manner: she along the edge of the road, and I behind the wheel. It made me mad but I couldn't force her to sit beside me, could I?

I never asked her about the man she was to marry. It was none of my business and, besides, I didn't want to know. From what she said I gathered that she hardly knew him. He was a sort of relative of her mother's and lived in the mountains, in a remote lumber camp. The families had a long-standing tradition of exchanging brides, and they had thus maintained their kinship for generations. Asel's parents would never allow her to marry an outsider. And marrying me was quite out of the question. What was I? A common lorry driver from nowhere, without kith or kin. I'd never dare to propose, even.

Asel was not talkative those days. She was busy with her thoughts. But I had given up all hope. Her fate was decided, our meeting like this would not alter anything. However, we made believe it was not so, the way children do, and went on seeing one another because we couldn't help ourselves. We both felt that otherwise life would not be worth living.

And so it went on for five days. I was getting ready

to leave the garage one morning, when I was urgently called to the office.

"I've good news for you!" Kadicha said, smiling. "You've been transferred to the Sinkiang run."

The news was staggering. Those last few days the thought of working elsewhere never crossed my mind. The run to China took many days, so how would I manage to see Asel? And could I simply vanish without letting her know?

"Aren't you glad?" Kadicha asked.

"What about the farm? There's plenty of work there," I stammered.

Kadicha shrugged in surprise.

"But you said you were sick of it?"

"So what if I did," I said rudely.

I took a chair and sat there, unable to make up my mind.

Djantai came rushing in. It appeared that he was to take on my collective-farm run. I sat up and listened, expecting him to refuse, for there was no money to be made on the country roads. To my surprise he agreed and, what is more, said:

"Send me to the world's end, Kadicha, if you like. The lambs are due for slaughter in the village just now, shall I bring you one?"

Only then did he notice me.

"Oh, sorry, I believe I'm in the way," he said.

"Get out of here," I hissed, without raising my head.

"Well, why don't you get a move on, Ilyas?" Kadicha said, and touched my shoulder.

"I've got to go to the farm. Please send me there, Kadicha."

"Are you in your right mind? How can I, I've no orders for you," she said and looked at me anxiously: "What's the attraction there?"

Without a word I left the office and went to the garage. Djantai flew past, giving me a knowing wink and almost grazing me with his mudguard.

I took as long as I could getting started, but there was nothing for it, I had to drive to the loading yard. The queue there was not long.

The other drivers called me to come and have a smoke, but I stayed in my cab. I'd close my eyes and picture Asel waiting and waiting on the road. And tomorrow and the next day too... What would she think of me?

My turn was coming. The lorry ahead of me was being loaded. I had a minute to go. "Forgive me, Asel. Forgive me, my pretty poplar," I thought, and suddenly an idea struck me: "I've time enough to go and tell her and then come back here. What does it matter if I start out a few hours later? I'll explain it to the chief afterwards, maybe he'll understand, if he doesn't he'll give me hell... But I can't help it, I've got to go."

I started the engine to back out of the line, but I was sandwiched between two lorries and could not budge. In the meantime, the driver in front of me had taken on his load and it was my turn.

"Hey, Ilyas, get under the crane," the operator called out to me.

The crane poised above me, now it was too late. There was no going anywhere with a load of export goods. Why hadn't I thought of it before? The clerk was handing me my papers. I looked out of the rear window: the container was being lowered into my lorry. It was coming down and down.

"Look out," I yelled, and shot forward, slipping from under the descending jib. (My engine was running.) Behind me I heard shouts, whistles and curses.

I flew past warehouses, wood-stacks and piles of coal, my hands one with the wheel. The road danced and jumped, the lorry lurched and I was jolted from side to side. But that was nothing unusual.

Soon I caught up with Djantai. He poked his head out to see who it was and his eyes popped when he

saw me. He could see I was in a hurry and should have let me pass, but not Djantai. I swerved off the road to try and overtake him, but he put on speed and wouldn't let me get back on the road. We raced on neck and neck: he--along the road, and I--alongside it. Crouched over our wheels, we glared at one another like a couple of wild beasts and swore.

"Where're you going? What for?" he called out to me.

I shook my fist at him. As I wasn't carrying a load, I managed to overtake him at last and left him far behind.

There was no Asel. I was as out of breath by the time I reached the village as if I had run all the way. There was not a soul either in their yard or out in the street. A saddled horse was tied to the tethering post. What could I do? I decided to wait; she would see my lorry and come out. I raised the bonnet and pretended I was fixing the engine, but I kept my eyes on the gate. Nor did I have to wait long: her mother came out with a man, a black-bearded stout old man wearing two padded robes: a velveteen robe over a plush one. He had a whip, a good one, in his hand. His face was flushed; he must have just had some hot tea. The two of them walked to the horse. Asel's mother held the stirrup respectfully and helped the old man clamber into the saddle.

"We are pleased with the match you have arranged," she said. "Let not our part of the bargain worry you either. We'll grudge our daughter nothing. We're not quite destitute, God be thanked."

"Whatever you can afford, *baibiche*, will be good enough for us," he said, settling himself comfortably in the saddle. "May God grant them happiness. As for the dowry, they are our own flesh and blood, aren't they? And it's not the first time we're getting related... Goodbye then, *baibiche*, so Friday it is to be."

"Yes, Friday, to be sure. A holy day. Good luck.

Give my regards to your wife."

"What are they planning for Friday?" I wondered. "What day is it today? Wednesday... Are they going to take her away on Friday then? Damn these ancient customs, how much longer will they be wrecking young people's lives!"

The old man rode off at a trot towards the mountains. Asel's mother watched him out of sight, then she turned and glared at me.

"So it's you again? This is no caravanserai. No parking here. Be off, d'you hear? Get out of here!"

So she had her suspicions already.

"I've had a breakdown," I muttered, and plunged right under the bonnet. I wasn't going away without seeing her, oh no!

The woman grumbled a little longer and went indoors.

I sat down on the running-board and lit a cigarette. A little girl came running up from somewhere. She skipped around the lorry. Was she Asel's sister perhaps? She looked a bit like her.

"Asel's gone," she said, and skipped off.

"Where?" I caught hold of her. "Where?"

"How do I know? Let go of me," she broke free of my grip and stuck her tongue out at me.

I slammed down the bonnet and got into the cab. Where now, where to look for her? Anyway it was time to be getting back. I crawled along the road and out into the steppe. At a ditch crossing I stopped because I had no idea where to go next, I got out and flopped down on the ground. What a day! No trace of Asel and my first long run bungled. With such thoughts, I was deaf and blind to the world. I don't know how long I lay there, but when at last I raised my head I saw a pair of legs in fancy shoes on the other side of the lorry. Asel! I knew her at once. My heart hammered, I was so happy. I got to my knees but was too weak to stand up. And it was the very spot where we first met.

"Keep going, Granny," I said to the shoes.

"But I'm not a granny," Asel joined in the game.

"What are you then?"

"I'm a girl."

"A pretty girl?"

"Come and see."

We both laughed. I leapt to my feet and rushed to her. And she ran to me. We stood facing one another.

"The prettiest girl in the world," I said. "How did you know I was here?"

She really was like a slender young poplar standing there in the wind in her short-sleeved dress.

"I was coming from the library and I saw your wheel tracks in the road."

"Honestly?" It meant more to me than if she had said she loved me. So she had been thinking about me, she cared enough to look for my wheel tracks.

"And so I ran here, thinking you'd be waiting for me..."

I took her hand.

"Get in, Asel, let's go for a ride."

She agreed gladly. She was different. And so was I. All our troubles and worries were over. Nothing existed for us but our happiness, the sky and the road. I opened the door, helped her in and got behind the wheel.

We went where the road led us, not knowing where or why. But that didn't worry us. Sitting there together, our eyes meeting and our hands touching, was happiness enough. Asel put my army cap straight for me--I had been wearing it for two years or more.

"It's nicer like this," she said, and clung to my shoulder tenderly.

The lorry flew across the steppe like a bird. The whole world had sprung to life, everything hurried to meet us--the mountains, the fields and the trees... The wind whipped at our faces, we flew on and on, the sun shone in the sky, we laughed, the air was fragrant with wormwood and tulips, and we breathed this air

of freedom...

A kite rose from the ruins of an ancient burial mound and flew low over the road, as if challenging us to a race.

Two horsemen shied away in fright. And then they spurred their horses after us with wild cries of "Stop, stop!" They whipped their horses until they seemed to flatten out on the road. I didn't know the riders. Maybe Asel did, though. Soon we left them behind in a cloud of dust.

Ahead of us a cart turned off the road to make way for us. The young couple in it stood up, and with their arms about each other's shoulders gave us a friendly wave.

"Thanks," I leaned out and called to them.

The steppe was behind us, we were on the asphalt motor road.

Lake Issyk-Kul could not be far. Turning off the road, I drove across country, through tall grass towards the lake shore. We came to a halt on a rise, right above the water.

Blue-and-white waves ran up the yellow shore, as though holding hands. The sun was setting, and at the far end of the lake the water was tinged with pink. A purple range of snow-capped mountains loomed in the distance. Dark grey clouds were gathering above them.

"Look, Asel, swans!"

Swans only come to Issyk-Kul in autumn and winter. In spring they are rare visitors. People say they are southern swans flying north. They're said to bring luck...

A flock of white swans was circling over the lake. They soared upwards and dropped down with outspread wings. They landed on the water, splashed about noisily, starting wide, foaming circles, and then took off again. At last they formed a long chain, and, flapping their wings in unison, flew towards the sandy slope of the shore for the night.

We sat in the cab and watched the swans in silence. And then I said, as if everything had been already settled between us:

"See those roofs on the shore, that's our depot. And this is our house," I indicated the cab with a wave of my hand and laughed. There was nowhere I could take her.

She looked into my eyes, and clung to me with tears and laughter.

"My darling, my very own! I don't need a house. If only my father and mother would understand one day, afterwards... They will never get over it, I know... But can I help it?.."

Darkness was falling quickly. Clouds spread over the sky and hung low over the water. The lake grew still and black. Someone seemed to be lurking in the mountains with an electric welder: a blinding light would flare up for a moment and go out. A storm was gathering. No wonder the swans had made a break in their journey and sought shelter here. They knew better than to get caught in a storm while flying over the mountains.

Thunder crashed. Rain poured down in wild, noisy torrents. The water in the lake began to churn and mutter, rolling and beating against the shores. It was the first spring thunderstorm. And it was our first night together. The water streamed down the wind-screen and the doors. Streaks of white lightning stabbed the black, yawning lake. We sat pressed tightly together, talking in whispers. Asel trembled, either frightened or cold, so I wrapped my jacket around her, holding her closer still, and it made me feel big and strong. I never knew there was so much tenderness in me, I never knew it was so wonderful to protect someone. I whispered in her ear: "I'll never let anyone hurt you, my pretty little poplar in a red kerchief."

The storm was over as suddenly as it began. But the lake could not at once still its excited waters, and

a thin rain was falling.

There was a small radio in the cab, my only valuable possession at the time. I turned it on. I remember it as if it were only yesterday, they were broadcasting the ballet *Cholpon* from the theatre in Frunze. Music came pouring into the cab from beyond the mountains, music as tender and compelling as the love that moved the heroes of the ballet. A storm of applause broke out, people called out the names of the dancers and perhaps they threw flowers at their feet, but I am sure that none of the audience enjoyed the ballet more than we did, in the cab of my lorry parked on the shore of the angry Issyk-Kul. The ballet was about us, about our love. The fate of *Cholpon*, the girl who went to seek her happiness, moved us deeply. My own *Cholpon*, my morning star, was there beside me. At midnight she fell asleep in my arms, but I couldn't calm down for a long time. Softly, I caressed her face and listened to the groans and rumblings in the depths of Issyk-Kul.

Next morning we drove to the depot. I was given a good telling-off, but then was forgiven in view of the extenuating circumstances. And my giving the crane the slip remained a standing joke at the depot for a long time.

I was to make my first trip to China, and I decided to take Asel along. My plan was to leave her at my friend Alibek Djanturin's place on the way. He lived with his family at the trans-shipping base near Naryn. It was not very far from the border and I always dropped in to see them when I was passing by. Alibek's wife was a nice woman, I liked her.

We were off. The first thing we did was buy Asel some clothes at a shop we passed. All she had was the dress she wore. Among other things, we bought her a large, bright, flowered shawl. And a good thing we did. On the way we met an elderly driver, our *aksakal* Urmat-ake. He signalled me to stop while yet a long way away. I got out of the cab and went up to greet

him.

"*Salaam aleikum*, Urmat-ake," I said.

"*Aleikum salaam*, Ilyas. May the leash of the falcon that has alighted on your arm prove strong," he said according to custom. "May God grant you happiness and offspring."

"Thank you. But how did you know about us, Urmat-ake?"

"Ah, my son. Good news does not lie unwanted on the ground. It has been travelling the length of the route by word of mouth."

I was quite amazed.

We stood talking in the road, but Urmat-ake did not so much as glance towards the lorry and Asel sitting in the cab. Fortunately she was quick to do the right thing: she put the shawl on her head and covered her face with it. Urmat-ake smiled benignly.

"Everything is proper now," he said. "Thank you, daughter, for respecting tradition. From now on you will be our daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law of all the *aksakals* in the motor depot. Here, Ilyas, this is for seeing your bride," he handed me some money. I could not offend him by refusing.

We went our different ways. Asel kept the shawl on.

She covered her face whenever we met anyone, the way it is done in every decent Kirghiz home. And afterwards we laughed about it. I thought she looked even lovelier wearing that shawl.

"My sweet bride, raise your eyes and kiss me," I begged.

"I can't, the *aksakals* might see us," she said laughing and giving me a peck on the cheek.

All the lorries we met stopped, and the drivers wished us happiness. Many not only had flowers, but gifts for us. They also had another idea which, I suppose, belonged to our Russian chaps. When they have a village wedding they usually decorate the car with flowers. Ours, too, was taking on a festive look.

with red, blue and green ribbons, silk scarves and bunches of flowers. The lorry was such a colourful sight, it could be seen miles away. We were happy, and I was proud of my friends. A friend in need is a friend indeed, the saying goes, but a friend in joy means as much.

It was on the road, too, that we met Alibek Djanturin, my dearest and closest friend. He's about two years older than I, a stocky man, with a large head. He has plenty of common sense and is an excellent driver. He enjoys everyone's respect at the depot and has been elected to the trade union committee. I wondered what he would say.

Alibek looked at the lorry in eloquent silence. Then he went up to Asel, shook her hand and wished her happiness.

"Here, let me have your route form," he demanded. Puzzled, I handed it to him. In a large hand he wrote across it: "Wedding trip No. 167". That was the serial number on it.

"What are you doing?" I gasped. "It's an official document, you know."

"The trip will go down in history," he said, chuckling. "Our clerks are human, aren't they? And now, let me shake your hand." He gave me a bear hug and a kiss. We both laughed. Afterwards, when we were ready to part and climb into our cabs, Alibek suddenly asked:

"Where are you going to live?"

I shrugged: we hadn't anywhere.

"This is our home," I pointed to the lorry.

"What, the cab? And you'll raise your children there? Look here, take my flat. I'll talk to the management and we'll move into our own house."

Alibek was building a house in Rybachye, not far from the depot. I had helped him with it in my spare time.

"But it's not fit to live in yet, is it?"

"Never mind, there's only a bit that still needs

doing. You won't get a better offer, you know our housing problem."

"Thanks, Alibek. We couldn't wish for anything better."

"We'll put you up in the meantime. Wait for me there on your way back. We'll talk it over with our wives and decide," he winked towards Asel.

"Yes, it's wives now."

"Enjoy your wedding trip," Alibek called out after us.

Dammit, it really was our wedding trip! A most wonderful wedding trip too.

We were glad that everything was turning out well, and my happiness would have been complete except for one encounter we had on the road.

Djantai's lorry shot out from behind a bend. He had Kadicha with him. He waved to me. I braked. The two lorries stopped with the sides all but touching.

"What are you decked out for, is it a wedding or something?" Djantai asked, leaning out.

"Yes, it is," I answered.

"You don't say!" he said incredulously and glanced at Kadicha. "And here we've been looking for him everywhere."

Kadicha's face had turned pale, she looked stunned.

"Hello, Kadicha," I said to her. She nodded without a word.

"Is this your betrothed then?" Djantai asked, catching on at last.

"No, my wife," I said and put my arm round Asel.

"Is that so?" Djantai's amazement grew. He was not sure whether the news was good or bad. "Well, well, my congratulations, my heartiest congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You're a smart one," Djantai smirked. "Got her without paying bride-money, eh?"

"Idiot," I swore at him. "Get going."

Aren't some people the very limit! I wanted to call him more names and leaned out of the cab to do it. But what I saw was Djantai standing beside his lorry, rubbing his cheek, and Kadicha running away into the field. He shook his fist at her and shouted. She flung herself down in the grass and buried her head in her arms. I didn't know what it was all about, but I felt sorry for her and, what was more, I felt I was to blame somehow. I said nothing to Asel about it.

A week later we settled down in the small cottage at the trans-shipping base. It was one of a group of two-room cottages occupied by lorry drivers and their families or filling station attendants. It was a convenient spot: right on the highway and not far from Naryn, which is a regional centre, after all. We could go to the cinema and the shops there, and there was also the hospital. And another thing, it was halfway on our route. In the main, we ran between Rybachye and Sinkiang, so we drivers had a chance to rest or sleep at home en route. I saw Asel nearly every day. No matter what my hurry, no matter how late the hour, I always managed to get home because Asel was waiting for me, worrying about me. We were beginning to buy things for the house. In short, it was getting to look like home. We decided that Asel would get a job too, in fact she insisted on it, as she had worked at home in the village and didn't like sitting idle. And suddenly, to our great joy, she discovered that she was going to have a baby.

I was driving back from China when the baby was born. I had left Asel at the maternity home in Naryn, and was hurrying there, worried and nervous. It was a boy! They didn't let me see Asel that day, of course. I drove into the mountains. It was winter. Nothing but snow and rocks all around. I was dazzled by this pattern of black and white, white and black. I flew up the road to the top of the Dolon pass. The height was tremendous. I could see the clouds creeping far below and the mountains standing up like little hooded

gnomes. I jumped to the ground, filled my lungs with air and shouted at the top of my voice:

"Hey you, mountains! I've got a son!"

The mountains seemed to quiver in response. They sent my words echoing, rolling from one gorge to the next.

We called the boy Samat. It was I who chose the name. All we talked about was Samat: our Samat, our little boy, Samat has smiled for the first time, Samat has cut his teeth... You know how it is with young parents.

We were happy, we loved one another, and then trouble came...

* * *

It's difficult to trace back the trouble to its root now. Everything is mixed up. A horrible mess... It's true, I do know what started it, but what's the use?

I met that man by chance on the road, and we parted never suspecting that our paths would cross again.

It was late autumn, and the weather was dreary. It snowed or rained, you could not tell which, just something damp and drizzly. Mist, as sticky as blancmange, clung to the mountain slopes. I had my wind-screen wipers working all the time. I was already well into the mountains, somewhere on the approaches to the Dolan pass. Oh, Dolan, Dolan, you Tien Shan giant! So much is associated with it. It's the hardest, the most dangerous part of the route. The road coils and winds loop upon loop, up a sheer wall, you climb up into the sky, crushing the clouds with your wheels, you can't bend forward, you're riveted to your seat, and suddenly you plunge down such a headlong drop that it takes all you've got to strain back from the wheel. And the weather there is like a bad-tempered camel. The Dolan doesn't care if

it's summer or winter, it will trap you with hail, rain or snow-storm any time it feels in the mood. That's what it's like, that Dolan of ours. But we Tien Shan people are used to its whims, we even venture up there at night... I'm remembering its dangers and hardships now, but then, working there day after day, I didn't give them much thought.

In one of the gorges near Dolan I overtook a lorry. It was a GAZ-51, I remember it perfectly. To be more exact, I did not overtake it, it had stalled there. There were two men trying to fix it. One of them walked slowly towards the middle of the road and raised his hand to stop me. He wore a soaking tarpaulin raincoat with the hood raised. He was forty or so with a brown toothbrush moustache, soldier style, a rather gloomy expression and calm eyes.

"Could you give me a lift to the Dolon road maintenance station, *djigit*?" he asked me. "I'll get a tractor there to haul this machine, the engine is dead."

"Sure, get in. But couldn't we manage it ourselves somehow?" I suggested and got out.

"Nothing to be done, there's not a spark of life," the driver said sourly and slammed down the bonnet. The poor chap was all doubled up and blue in the face from the cold. A stranger to our parts, a city man he must have been, and he looked about him with a lost air. They were carrying a load from Frunze to the maintenance station. What could be done to help them? And suddenly I had a crazy idea. First, I peered at the sky above the pass. It was darkening, and the clouds hung low. I decided to risk it anyway. It wasn't much of an idea, but the risk it involved thrilled me. It was like going into attack against the enemy.

"Are your brakes in order?" I asked the driver.

"I should hope so, would I drive without brakes? I'm telling you the engine is dead."

"Have you got a tow-line?"

"Sure, why?"

"Tie it to my lorry here, I'll take you in tow."

They both gaped at me and made no move.

"Are you mad?" the driver asked quietly.

I'm just made that way; I don't know if it's a good or a bad trait, but once I hit on an idea I have to carry it out.

"Listen, friend, do as I say. I swear I'll get you there."

The driver merely waved my offer aside.

"Drop it. Don't you know you can't tow another lorry on this road? I wouldn't even consider it."

I felt as stung as if he had refused to do something of vital importance for me.

"You're an ass, and a cowardly one."

He consulted the other man who, I later found out, was head of the road-maintenance crew. He looked at me and told the driver to get the tow-line.

The driver was appalled.

"You'll answer for this, Baitemir-ake," he said.

"We all will," the man said curtly.

I liked him. A man like that wins your respect at once.

And so I towed their lorry. Everything went well at first. But on the Dolon ascent the road is hard on the engine, what with climbing all the time and taking some steep drops besides. The engine began to groan and roar, it almost deafened me. Oh no, I thought, I'll squeeze everything out of you, all you've got to give! You see, I had noticed before that no matter how hard the pull up the Dolon, the engine never went flat out, there was always some power left in reserve. We were always loaded with caution, we took on no more than seventy per cent of the maximum load. Naturally, I was not thinking of that at the time. I was fired with excitement, a mad sense of power. It was a gamble I had to win: I would get them there. But it proved harder than I thought. My lorry trembled and shook from the strain, and the wind-screen got plastered with wet muck, in spite of the wipers.

Clouds came crowding down on me, creeping across the road, right under the wheels. The bends were sharp now, the descents sheer. In my heart of hearts I was already cursing myself for sticking my neck out: supposing those chaps got killed? The strain on me was greater than on the engine. I took off everything--my cap, padded coat, jacket and sweater. I was wearing nothing but a shirt and yet sweat poured off my body as if I were in a steam bath. It was no joke--the lorry plus its load weighed quite a lot. Baitemir helped by standing on the running-board, shouting directions to me and signalling to the other driver to co-ordinate our movements. When we began crawling round the hairpin bends, I thought he would not be able to stand on the running-board any longer and would jump down out of danger. But no, he didn't stir. He tensed his body like a golden eagle ready to soar and stood there, gripping the door. I took a look at his face--it was so calm, it might have been carved out of granite. Drops of rain rolled down his cheeks and glistened on his moustache. I immediately felt easier in my mind.

We had just one more climb and that would be all, we'd have won. Baitemir's shout broke into my self-satisfied thoughts: "Look out, there's a lorry coming. Get over to the right."

I swerved to the right. Someone was coming down the mountain--it was Djantai. He was sure to talk and I'd get it in the neck from the labour safety chief. Djantai was coming nearer and nearer. He was scowling and straining back from the wheel. We passed so close to one another our mudguards almost scraped. Djantai started when he saw me, shaking his head in the red-fox hat. "To hell with you," I thought. "Talk all you want."

We topped the rise, drove down a steep slope and then along the road as far as the turning to the road-maintenance station. I'd made it. I cut my engine and couldn't hear a thing. It seemed to me that it was not

I who had gone deaf, but nature which had gone dumb. There was not a sound. I crawled out and sat on the running-board, gasping for breath; I was tired and besides the air was so thin up in the pass. Baitemir quickly threw my padded jacket round my shoulders and pulled my cap down over my ears. The other driver staggered up. He was pale and couldn't speak. He squatted on the ground in front of me and held out a packet of cigarettes. My hand shook as I took one. We all lit up and gradually came back to normal. Again that damned sense of power surged through me.

"Who said I couldn't?" I yelled, and slapped the driver on the shoulder so hard that he sat down with a bump. At that we all three jumped to our feet and started slapping one another on the back and shoulders, roaring with laughter and shouting like a bunch of happy idiots.

At last we calmed down and had another smoke. I put on my warm clothes, looked at my watch and saw that I had to hurry.

"Well, I've got to go," I said.

Baitemir frowned. "No, you've got to come to my place and be my guest," he said.

But I didn't have time. "Thanks, but I really can't," I said. "I want to drop in at my house on the way, my wife will be waiting for me."

"Oh, don't go. We'll open a bottle," my new friend, the driver, begged.

"Let him be," Baitemir cut him short. "His wife is waiting for him. What's your name, by the way?"

"Ilyas."

"Go home, Ilyas. Thank you for helping us out."

Baitemir rode on my running-board as far as the main road, then he silently pressed my hand and jumped off.

At the turning I glanced back. Baitemir was still standing in the middle of the road. He appeared to be lost in thought, with his cap clutched in his hand and

his head hung low.

And that is all.

With Asel I didn't go into details. I just said I'd got held up on the road, giving some people a hand. I had no secrets from my wife, but that was not the sort of thing she needed to know. As it was, she was always worrying about me. Besides, I didn't intend playing such fool's tricks again. It was one of those things that happen once: I had towed a lorry up the pass, and that was that. I would have forgotten all about it the next day if I had not caught cold up there. I didn't feel well driving back, and collapsed the minute I got home. I remember nothing except that in my delirium I kept pulling a lorry over the Dolon pass. The blizzard scorched my face, I was so exhausted I could not breathe, I turned the wheel but it seemed made of cotton wool and gave way in my hands. Ahead of me was the pass--the road was endless, the radiator was pointed skywards, the lorry roared and droned as it climbed up and up, and suddenly it went over the edge of a precipice... That was the crisis, probably. The turn for the better came on the third day. After two more days in bed I felt well enough to get up, but Asel would not hear of it. Which one of us had been sick, I wondered, taking a good look at her. She had changed so, she looked completely washed-out; there were blue rings under her eyes, and she was so thin a puff of wind could have blown her over. And she had the baby to look after as well. No, I thought, this won't do. I had no right to play the sick fool and let her nurse me any longer. What she needed was a change. And so I got up and began to put on my clothes.

"Asel," I called her softly, not to waken the baby.

"Ask someone to mind Samat, you and I are going to town to see a film."

She ran over, pushed me back on the pillows, and gazed at me as if she were seeing me for the first time after along separation. She tried to hold back her

tears, but they glistened on her lashes and her lips quivered. Burying her face in my chest, she burst out crying.

"Why, Asel, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just that I'm so glad you got well."

"I am, too, but why get so worked up? What if I was a little unwell, at least it gave me a chance to be with you all this time and to play with Samat as much as I wanted." Samat could already crawl, he would be walking any day, and babies are funniest at that age. "If you want to know, I would not mind falling sick again."

"Oh don't! I don't want you to be ill again," Asel protested.

Samat woke up. Asel carried him, warm and sleepy, to our bed. We had a lot of fun, the three of us, with Samat climbing all over us like a baby bear.

"Isn't this fun, and you'd weep!" I said. "We'll go and see your parents soon. One look at Samat and they'll forgive and forget. You see if they don't!"

Yes, we did mean to go to her parents, cap in hand, the way it's done in such cases. But I had to apply for leave first, and buy presents for all her relatives. I did not want to go empty-handed.

In the meantime, winter carne into its own. Winter is hard in the Tien Shan mountains, with blizzards, snowfalls and avalanches. It adds to the drivers' troubles and even more so to those of the road-maintenance crews, who have to watch out for avalanches. In places where there is danger of one they have to blow up the mass of snow in good time and then clear the road. True, that winter there was comparatively little trouble, or maybe I simply did not notice, we drivers are busy people, you know. And besides, our motor depot was given an additional assignment. Rather, we drivers volunteered to take it on, and I was the first one to offer my services. Nor do I regret it even now, though I think it was the cause of all the grief to come. This is what happened.

I was driving back to the depot one evening, Asel had asked me to drop a small parcel at Alibek Djanturin's for his wife, and so I rolled up to their gate and sounded my horn. Alibek's wife came out.

"Where's Alibek?" I asked her.

"How do you mean where? At the railway station, where everyone else is. They say the train has already arrived."

I had no idea what she was talking about, so she told me. The workers of a certain enterprise in China had sent a telegram to our motor depot requesting urgent delivery of equipment consigned to them.

Quickly, I drove to the railway station to find out what it was all about. Freight is unloaded at the railway terminal in the gorge where it opens on to the lake. There was an uneasy semi-darkness over everything. The wind tore in gusts, swinging the lamps on their posts and chasing the whirling snow along the sleepers. Locomotives were shunting cars on the lines. On the farther line the jib of a crane was swooping through the air, carrying packing-cases reinforced with iron hoops and wire. They were unloading trans-shipment cargo for Sinkiang where a large engineering works was being built. We had already delivered some equipment there.

The place was jammed with lorries, but no one was loading yet. They seemed to be waiting for something. The drivers sat in their cabs or on their running-boards, and some took shelter from the wind behind the stacked packing-cases. No one bothered to answer when I said hello. They were sitting and smoking in silence. I saw Alibek standing a little apart from the others. I went up to him.

"What's going on here? What did the telegram say?"

"They want to commission the works ahead of schedule."

"Well?"

"Well, it's up to us. Look at the cargo piled along

the line, and there's more coming. How long will it take us to deliver it? And those people need it urgently, they're relying on us. They're counting the days."

"You sound as though it's my fault. What have I got to do with it?"

"So that's your attitude? D'you come from another state or something? Or can't you understand how important it is?"

"You *are* a crazy one," I said, stung by his tone, and walked away.

Up came Amanjolov, chief of the depot. He lit his cigarette from a match struck by one of the chaps, shielding the flame with his coat. Amanjolov ran his eye over the lot of us.

"I'll get in touch with the Ministry by phone, maybe they'll send us a reinforcement. But it's no good relying on it, comrades," he said. "I don't know yet what we can do..."

"It's a problem all right, Comrade Amanjolov," a voice spoke up. "It's bulky cargo. We can't take more than two or three cases, and even if we work round the clock we won't be through till spring."

"That's the whole point," said Amanjolov. "It's got to be done, nonetheless. Go home now, all of you, and sleep on it."

He got into his car and drove away. Not one of our chaps made a move to go. Someone sitting in a dark comer said in a low rumble, addressing no one in particular:

"Like hell we will. You can't cut two coats out of one sheepskin. They ought to have done their thinking earlier." The man stood up, stamped out his cigarette, and went to his lorry.

"Sure they're always doing it," another man supported him. "When the water comes up to their chins they cry to us for help, we're good fellows then."

"It's a matter of brotherly aid, and you're haggling

like a fishwife," someone shouted.

I was taking no part in the argument, but all at once, I remembered towing that lorry over the mountains and felt a surge of excitement again.

"And I say it's simple enough!" I shouted, getting into the centre of the crowd. "We've got to tow trailers, that's all."

No one stirred. Some did not even give me a glance. Only a hopeless idiot could have suggested a thing like that. Djantai gave a soft whistle and said: "Hear that?" I knew his voice.

I wanted to tell them how I had towed that lorry the other day, but I wasn't given a chance. One of the men, a big hefty chap, got down from his packing-case, handed his gloves to the driver sitting next to him, and strode to me. He grabbed me by the lapels of my coat and jerked me towards him.

"Let me smell your breath."

I blew in to his face.

"He's sober," the man said in a puzzled tone and let go of me.

"Then he must be a damned fool," his friend suggested. Both of them got into their lorries and drove away. The rest got up without making any comment and turned to go home. I had never made such an ass of myself before. My very cap turned crimson from shame.

"Wait a minute, don't go," I darted from one driver to the other. "I'm talking sense. It is possible to tow a trailer..."

One of the older drivers, an *aksakal*, turned to me with a pained expression.

"When I first took the wheel you were still wetting your diapers, young fellow. The Tien Shan mountains are no dance-floor. I'm sorry for you, don't make us laugh."

With mocking smiles, the men went to their cars. And then I yelled at them for all the world to hear:

"Call yourselves drivers! You're a bunch of old

women!"

It was a stupid thing to say, it was asking for trouble.

They all paused, and then made a rush at me.

"You'd toy with people's lives, would you?"

"Our innovator! It's a bonus he's after!" shouted Djantai.

The shouts were getting menacing. I was pressed back against the packing-cases. I was afraid they'd beat me to a pulp, so I bent down and picked up a board.

"Get back, all of you!" Someone came pushing through the crowd. It was Alibek.

"Quiet!" he roared. "Now, Ilyas, speak up. And be quick about it."

"What's the use," I said, panting. "They've torn all my buttons off. All right. I have towed a lorry, loaded with cargo, over the pass to the road-maintenance station. That's all.''

The men were dubious but silent.

"And did you get it there?" one of them asked.

"Yes. I got it over the Dolon and to the road-maintenance station."

"Just think of that!" one of them marvelled.

"He's just yapping," a voice cried.

"Only dogs yap. Djantai saw me do it. Hey, Djantai, where are you? Tell them. Remember, you saw me..."

But no answer came from Djantai. He had made himself scarce. No wonder I had always detested that chap. However, it did not matter. An argument started again, some men were already siding with me. But then one of the unbelievers settled their doubts for them at a stroke.

"It's all empty talk," he said morosely. "Someone did something once, so what? We're not children. Towing trailers on our route is forbidden. And no one will sanction it. Try putting it to the labour safety chief, he'll give you such hell you won't know what hit you. He won't go to jail because of you... That puts the

lid on that."

"Oh, go on! Who wants anyone's sanction?" another man said. "Ivan Stepanovich here first opened the route over the pass in the thirties in his ton-and-a-half truck, and he did not have anyone's permission either. He just went and did it. He's here now, he'll tell you..."

"So I did," Ivan Stepanovich said. "But I have my doubts about this matter here: no one ever tried towing a trailer even in summer, and it's winter now."

Alibek kept silent all this time, but now he decided to speak.

"We've done enough arguing," he said. "It hasn't been done before but the idea is worth sleeping on. Only not your way, Ilyas--slap, bang and go! We've got to prepare for it, think it over properly, consult someone competent, and make trial runs. Words alone can prove nothing."

"I'm going to prove it," I declared. "I'll prove it while you're sleeping on it. And then you'll see who was right!"

Everyone has his temper, of course. One should be able to control it, but sometimes one can't. I had the wheel in my hands, but I was not aware of either the lorry or the road. Mixed feelings of frustration, bitterness and resentment seethed in me. The more I thought about that challenge to my vanity the more worked up I got. You wait, my good chaps, I'll prove it to you yet! I'll teach you how to distrust a person, and laugh at him. I'll teach you how to play too safe! Alibek's a fine one too: we've got to sleep on it, prepare for it, make trial runs! Bah! He's a wise and cautious sort. But I say caution be damned! I'll do it just like that and make them eat their words!

When I brought the lorry back to the garage, I stayed there a long time tinkering with this and that. My nerves were stretched to breaking point. I wanted one thing only and that was to get hold of a trailer

and start for the pass at once. I had to do it, no matter what. But who'd let me have a trailer?

Thinking hard, I plodded to the exit across the yard. It was late. All the windows were dark except for the one in the dispatcher's office. I stopped--why, Kadicha was the very person! A dispatcher could do anything. I believed Kadicha was on duty. She would not refuse me, she could not. After all I was not planning to commit a crime, rather the contrary, and she would only be helping me to do something for the common good.

When I came near the dispatcher's window I caught myself thinking that I had not gone in through the door for a long time but had spoken to Kadicha through the window like everyone else. The thought embarrassed me. The door opened, and Kadicha came out.

"I was just coming in, Kadicha, I'm glad you haven't gone."

"I am going."

"Come on, I'll walk you home."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, gave me a searching look, and said: "All right."

We went out through the gates. The street was dark. cold wind blew in from the lake and the waves could be heard breaking on the shore. Kadicha took my arm and pressed close to me, shivering in the wind.

"Feeling cold?" I asked her.

"I shan't freeze with you so near," she laughed.

Only a minute before my nerves had been on edge, but now for some reason I felt perfectly calm.

"When do you go on duty tomorrow, Kadicha?"

"In the afternoon. Why?"

"I have something on, it's terribly important, and everything depends on you."

She would not listen to me at first, but I persisted. We stopped under the lamp on the comer.

"Oh, Ilyas," Kadicha sighed and looked anxiously in

to my eyes. "You will come to no good."

But I already knew for certain that she would do what I was asking.

"Trust me," I said, taking her hand. "Everything will be all right. You'll do it?"

She sighed in resignation.

"What can one do with a person like you?" she said, and nodded.

I hugged her on an impulse.

"You should have been born a *djigit*, Kadicha! See you tomorrow," I shook her hand firmly. "Get all the papers ready by evening, all right?"

"Don't run away," she said, holding my hand in hers. Then she turned abruptly and said: "All right, go... Going to the hostel?"

"Yes, Kadicha."

"Good night."

The following day we had technical inspection. Everyone at the depot was nervous: those blasted inspectors always came at the wrong time, they were always finding fault with everything and drawing up statements about one thing or another. They were a nuisance, nothing but trouble. They themselves remained cool as cucumbers throughout.

My lorry was in order, I knew it, still I kept out of their way and pretended I was busy fixing it. I had to kill time until Kadicha went on duty. No one spoke to me, no one mentioned the row of the night before. Obviously they could not be bothered with me just then. They were anxious to get the ordeal over with and start on their run to make up for lost time. But I felt resentful all the same.

My turn. came in the afternoon. The inspectors left at last. The place seemed empty and very quiet. Our trailers were kept at the back of the yard. They were used occasionally for local business on level roads. I picked my choice. It was an ordinary chassis on four wheels. As plain a contraption as that. Yet the excitement and trouble it was to cause... If I had

known what lay in store for me! But I didn't, and so I went to the hostel, feeling perfectly calm, to get a good meal and an hour's sleep before starting out. The going would be hard, that much I realised. However, sleep would not come. I kept tossing and turning in my bed. When it began to grow dark I went back to the depot.

Kadicha was there already. The papers were in order. I picked them up and hurried to the garage. "Now, look out, all of you!" I backed my lorry to the trailer, throttled the motor, and got out to have a look around. There was no one in sight. The surf on the lake and the whirring machine-tools in the repair shop were the only sounds I heard. The starless sky appeared clear enough. The motor was purring behind me, and my heart was hammering in my chest. I started to light a cigarette, but threw it away. Later...

The watchman stopped me at the gate.

"Where are you off to?" "To load, *aksakal*," I said, trying to sound natural. "Here's my pass."

The old man brought the paper close to his eyes, but could not make out the words in the poor light.

"You're holding me up, *aksakal*. The job can't wait," I said to him impatiently.

The loading was a routine procedure. I took on a capacity load. No one said a word, which quite surprised me. Not until I was well out on the road did I light a cigarette. I settled down comfortably, switched on the headlights and stepped on the gas. The dark road came to life and sped past me. The way was clear, there was nothing to prevent me from going full out. The going was smooth, I could hardly feel the trailer rumbling behind me. True, I did skid slightly on the bends, it was harder to right the lorry, but I thought I would manage with practice. I crouched over my wheel like a rider crouching over the neck of his horse. I had to drive fast while the road was straight. By midnight I expected to start my

assault on the Dolon.

At first, I made better time than I had hoped, but once I reached the mountains I had to drive with greater care. Not because the capacity load was too much on the engine, no; going uphill was hard, but going downhill was worse. The trailer careened, clattered and butted into the lorry, causing me plenty of trouble. I had to keep changing gears, braking, and wheeling back into the road. I kept myself in hand at first, and tried to take it easy. But it bothered and maddened me more and more. Had it ever occurred to anyone to count all those ascents and descents, I wondered. Still, I did not lose heart. There was no danger, I'd simply wear myself out and that would be all. "Never mind. I'll take a rest before I come to the pass. I'll get through." I did not stop to think why the going was so much harder than it had been that autumn day when I towed Baitemir's lorry.

Dolon was drawing nearer. The beams of my headlights played on the massive rock formation of the gorge and the snow-capped crags walling in the road. Large snowflakes came drifting down. "The wind must have blown down the snow," I thought. But I knew it was a snowfall when the flakes began to plaster the wind-screen and slide down the glass. It was a wet snow, and it was falling pretty hard. I swore through clenched teeth and switched on the wipers.

The first steep ascents to the pass began. The engine went into its familiar droning song; a monotonous, strenuous roaring filled the murky darkness. I topped the rise at last. Now I had a long drive down the slope. The engine purred and the lorry slid down, lurching and tossing from side to side. The trailer was doing a crazy jig behind me, jamming the lorry, butting in to it, relaying to the nerves in my back the jolts, the clattering and the grating of metal against metal at her link. That grating unnerved me, my spine ached from it terribly, and the pain again

was relayed to my forearms. The wheels refused to obey the brakes and skidded on the wet snow. The lorry started sliding sideways across the road, shaking and jolting, tearing the wheel out of my hands. I turned it hard and put on the brakes. I could not go on. I had no strength left in me. I switched off the headlights and killed the engine. My hands were so numb, they were no better than pieces of wood. Relaxing, I heard my own wheezy breathing. I felt better after a few minutes and lit a cigarette. There was darkness all around me, a desolate stillness. Only the wind whistled in the door cracks. I shrank from picturing what lay ahead. From there on the way was a nightmare of hairpin bends up sheer mountain-sides. The endless climb up the winding road is a terrible strain both on the engine and the hands of the driver. However, I could not afford to sit there and brood on it. The snow was falling hard.

I started the engine. With an anguished roar the lorry started uphill. Clenching my teeth, I took one loop after the next, allowing myself no pause for breath. The hairpin bends were behind me. Now I had to make a short but sharp descent, drive along a straight road down a gentle incline as far as the turning to the road-maintenance station, and then scale the last height. With difficulty I managed the descent. I went flat out on the straight road, about four kilometres long, gathering momentum to propel me up the mountain. I was going up, up and up... But the impetus was not strong enough. Ominously, the lorry began to slow down. I went into second gear, then into low. I gripped the wheel. The stars flashed out through a rent in the ponderous, dark clouds. The lorry refused to move an inch. The wheels would not grip the road, they skidded sideways. I pressed my foot down on the gas as far as it could go and yelled crazily: "Come on! Just a little more! Come on!"

The engine changed its droning howl to a tremulous ringing, then the sound broke off. One

short chortle and went dead. Slowly, the lorry started sliding backwards, downhill. The brakes were no help. It was rolling downhill, pulled by the heavy trailer, until at last it bumped into a rock and stopped. All became very quiet. I pushed open the door and looked out. It was what I thought. Damn it! The trailer had tumbled into a ditch. There was no way of getting it out. Exasperated, I started the engine again and jerked forward. The wheels turned madly, the lorry strained forward with all its power but never moved an inch. I jumped out into the road and ran to the trailer. The wheels were deep in the ditch. Blinded with rage, incensed to a savage fury, I threw my body against the trailer and pushed. Then I sat on my haunches, levered the trailer with my shoulder and tried to heave it. I was growling like a beast, there was a riveting pain my head from the strain. But I hadn't a dog's chance. Exhausted, I sprawled face down in the road, and clawing at the snow and the mud I wept from frustration. When I got up, I stumbled to the lorry and sat down on the running-board.

Suddenly I heard a car in the distance. Two pinpoints of light came down the sharp descent and started towards me along the straight stretch of road. I did not care who the driver was or what brought him there in the middle of the night, all I was conscious of was fear of those twin lights that were coming after me, to catch me. Like a thief about to be caught red-handed, I leapt to my feet, jerked free the connecting link, scrambled into my cab and raced uphill, abandoning the trailer in the ditch.

I was haunted by an eerie fear. The trailer was chasing me, it was catching up… My speed was near impossible, and the only reason I did not crash was because I knew the road so well.

It was dawn when I got to the trans-shipping base. Like a raving lunatic I banged on my door with my fists. I did not look at Asel when she opened it and

went right in the way I was, covered with mud from head to toe. Breathing heavily, I flopped down on something damp. It was a pile of washing. I hunted through my pockets for a cigarette. My fingers found the ignition keys. I hurled them against the wall, dropped my head on my chest and sat there without moving: stunned, broken and dirty. Staring down at the floor I saw Asel's bare feet shuffling nervously close to the table legs. What could I tell her? She picked up the ignition keys and put them on the table.

"D'you want a wash? I've been keeping some water hot for you since last night," she said softly.

Slowly, I raised my head. Asel stood before me, shivering in her nightgown, her thin hands pressed to her breast. Her frightened eyes looked at me with anxiety and sympathy.

"I have ditched the trailer in the mountains," I said in a strange, bleak voice.

"What trailer?" she asked, bewildered.

"An ordinary green, metal trailer No. 02-38! Does it matter *what* trailer?" I shouted irritably. "I stole it, understand? Stole it."

With a low gasp Asel sat down on the bed.

"What on earth for?"

"What for! What for!" Her inability to understand drove me mad. "I wanted to get through the pass with a trailer. Understand? I wanted to show them... And I was licked."

I thrust my face into my hands. For a while neither of us spoke. Suddenly Asel got up with a look of resolution, and began to dress.

"Come on, don't just sit there," she said sternly.

"What am I supposed to do?" I mumbled.

"Go back to the depot."

"How? Without the trailer?"

"Explain it when you get there."

"Are you mad?" I flared up and started running up and down the room. "I'll look fine coming in without

the trailer! I'm sorry, forgive me, I was wrong! D'you want me to crawl in on my belly and beg their forgiveness? Never! Let them do what they like. I don't give a damn!"

My shouting woke up Samat. He began to cry. Asel picked him up in her arms, but he only cried the louder.

"You're a coward," Asel said to me, quietly but firmly.

"Wha-at?" I saw red. I rushed at her, I wanted to strike her, but did not dare. The astonishment in her wide-open eyes stopped me. In her pupils I saw my own hideous, distorted face.

Pushing her roughly aside, I strode to the door and out, slamming it hard.

It was already light outside. And in the light of day all the happenings of the night before appeared to me even blacker, uglier and more irreparable. The thing to do now was to deliver the cargo I had in the lorry. It was the least I could do. And after that, I did not know...

I did not go home on my way back. And it was not because I had quarrelled with Asel. No, I simply did not want to show my face to anyone, I did not want to see anyone. I don't know about other people, but I like to be alone when I'm in trouble and let no one see it. Who cares about my troubles anyway? Clench your teeth and bear it if you can until it blows over...

That night I slept at the inn. It was one long nightmare and not sleep. I dreamt that I was searching for the trailer in the mountains. I could see the wheel tracks but no trailer. Where had it gone, who had taken it away, I was dashing about in a panic, asking everyone...

And it really was not there when I drove past that cursed spot on my way back. I found out afterward that it was Alibek who had towed it to the depot.

I arrived there soon after Alibek and the trailer. When I looked at myself in the wind-screen mirror I

hardly knew my own face, it was so haggard and drawn.

It was an ordinary morning at the depot, everyone was busy with his routine affairs, and only I felt like a trespasser as I hesitantly drove in through the gate, crossed the yard slowly and parked as far from the garage as possible. Nor did I get out at once, but took a good look about me first. People had dropped whatever they were doing and stood staring at me. God, how wanted to swing the lorry about and be off and away, no matter where. But it couldn't be done and I had to get out of the cab. Mustering all my will power, I walked across the yard to the dispatcher's office. I tried to appear unconcerned, but actually I felt like a deserter marched through the ranks. I knew that all the drivers were following me with dark looks. No one called out to me or said hello. I would have done the same, I suppose, if I had been in their place.

I tripped on the threshold, and it gave me a jolt: I had forgotten all about Kadicha and the trouble I had landed her in.

A poster hanging in the corridor seemed to stare me straight in the face. The caption, in large print, was "Disgrace" and below was a drawing of the trailer abandoned in the mountains...

I looked away. My face stung as though from a slap. I walked into the dispatcher's office. Kadicha was talking on the telephone. She hung up when she saw me.

"Here," I threw the wretched route form on her table.

Kadicha looked at me with compassion. I only hoped she would not make a row, would not start crying. "Afterwards, some other place, but please not now!" I implored her with my eyes. She understood, and said nothing.

"Did they raise a big stink?" I asked her in a low voice.

Kadicha nodded.

"Never mind," I muttered through clenched teeth in an attempt to give her heart.

"They've taken you off the run," she said.

"They have? For good?" I asked, smiling crookedly.

"They meant to ... but the drivers stood up for you... They've put you back on the local runs for the time being. Go and see the chief, he wants you."

"No. They can do the deciding without me. I'm not going to cry about it."

I walked out feeling pretty rotten, and started down the corridor. There was someone coming towards me. I wanted to squeeze past, but Alibek blocked my way.

"Oh no, you wait," he said, crowding me into a corner. Fixing me with a baleful look, he said in a low, husky voice: "So what have you proved, you hero? Proved that you're a son of a bitch, eh?"

"I tried for the best," I mumbled.

"That's a lie! You wanted to grab all the credit. You did it for yourself and no one else. But you've wrecked a good idea. Try and prove it to someone now that it *is* possible to tow a trailer over the pass. You're an idiot. A damned upstart."

Maybe his words would have made another man see reason, but not me. I was well past that. To me it was adding insult to injury. So he thought I was a damned upstart, that I wanted all the glory for myself alone! But that was not true!

"Get out of my way," I pushed Alibek aside. "I'm sick enough."

I went outside. A cold biting wind was whirling the powdery snow about the yard. The men looked at me askance, never saying a word. What was I to do? I thrust my clenched hands into my trouser pockets and marched to the gate. The film of ice on the puddles broke with a crunch under my feet. I saw an empty grease can on the ground and kicked it through the gate with all my might and followed it out

into the street.

All that day I aimlessly paced the streets of the small town, or wandered up and down the empty wharf. It was stormy weather on the Issyk-Kul, the barges were rolling and rocking at their moorings.

And then I found myself sitting at a table in the pub on the wharf. There was a half-empty bottle of vodka and some food on a plate before me. I was staring dully at my boots, the first glass had knocked me silly.

"*Djigit*, why so sad?" I suddenly heard a friendly, slightly mocking voice close beside me. With an effort I raised my head. It was Kadicha.

"Drinking alone is no fun, is it?" she said with a smile and took a chair at my table. "Let's have a drink together, shall we?"

She poured the vodka in two glasses and pushed mine towards me.

"Here you are," she said and winked at me gaily. She behaved as if we had simply dropped in there together for a drink and a chat.

"Why so jolly?"

"Why mope? When I'm with you, Ilyas, nothing matters. But I thought you were made of stronger stuff. Oh well, here goes," she said with a soft chuckle, moved up closer and touched my glass with hers, her dark, caressing eyes gazing into mine.

We drank up. I lit a cigarette and felt a little better, smiling for the first time that day.

"You're a sport, Kadicha," I said and took her hand.

When we left the place it was already dark. A wind blowing in gusts from the lake swung the treetops and the lamps. The ground swayed under my feet. Kadicha was leading me along, holding me by the arm. With tender care she had raised my coat collar.

"I've landed you in trouble, Kadicha," I said, my sense of guilt and gratitude overwhelming me. "But I want you to know I'll stand by you... I'll take the

blame alone..."

"Forget it, my darling," she said. "You're a restless sort. You're always rushing into things, and it hurts me to watch you. I used to be like that too. Take life as it comes, you can't beat it, just grab what you can take... Why challenge fate..."

"There are different ways of looking at it," I objected, but after a moment's thought said: "Maybe you're right at that."

We stopped outside Kadicha's house.

"Well, I'm home," she said.

I did not hurry to go. There was something that bound us together now. And I did not feel like going to the hostel just then. Truth is all very well, but sometimes it is too bitter, and you want to avoid hearing it.

"Why the frown, darling?" Kadicha said. "Tired? Too far to go?"

"It's all right. I'll get there somehow. Good night."

She touched my hand.

"Heavens, it's icy cold! I'll warm it for you," she said, putting my hand inside her coat and pressing it to her breast. I did not dare pull my hand away, I was too weak to resist her warm caress. I felt the beating of her heart, it seemed to be clamouring for a long-awaited response, for its due. I was drunk, but not dead-drunk. Gently, I withdrew my hand.

"Are you going?"

"Yes."

"Good-bye then," Kadicha said with a sigh, and quickly walked away. In the darkness, I heard the banging of a gate. I turned to go, but I only made a few steps. I don't know how it happened, but I was back at the gate. Kadicha stood there waiting for me. She threw her arms around me, held me tight and kissed me on the mouth.

"You came back!" she whispered, and holding my arm led me indoors.

I woke up in the middle of the night and could not

understand at first where I was. My head was splitting. We were lying side by side. Kadicha, warm and naked, nestled close to me and breathed evenly into my shoulder. I had to go at once. I stirred. Without opening her eyes, she held me tighter.

"Don't go," she begged softly. She raised her head and sought my eyes in the darkness, speaking in a passionate whisper: "I can't live without you any more... You belong to me. You always have been mine. That's all that matters to me. I want nothing but your love, Ilyas. That's all I ask... But I won't give you up, understand? I won't give you up!" she burst out crying, and her tears ran down my face. I stayed. We fell asleep at dawn and slept until late. It was morning. I dressed quickly, an icy, nervous fear gripping my heart. I hurried out into the yard, pulling on my sheepskins on the way, and slipped out of the gate. And there I ran straight into Djantai in his red-fox hat with the dangling ear-flaps. We both stood stock-still for a moment. If eyes could kill, mine surely would! He was on his way to work, he lived nearby. I pretended not to notice him and quickly walked away in the direction of the depot. Behind me I heard his suggestive cough. The snow crunched under his feet, he neither tried to overtake me nor fall behind. Thus, walking single file, we got to the depot.

Instead of the garage I went to the office. A hum of voices came from the room of the chief engineer where five-minute meetings were held every morning before work. How I wished I could walk into that room, sit on the low window-sill, cross my legs casually, light a cigarette, and listen to the friendly bickering of the drivers. I never imagined the prospect could be so alluring. But I dared not go in. I don't think it was sheer cowardice; it was that same resentment, my desperate, defiant and helpless stubbornness. And spending the night with Kadicha had added to the confusion in my mind. It also appeared that people had no intention of forgetting

my unfortunate experiment. They were talking about me just then.

"It's a disgrace!" someone shouted. "He ought to be tried for this, and you're making excuses for him. You have the nerve to say that his plan was sound! But didn't he abandon the trailer in the mountains?"

"You're right," another voice broke in. "We know his sort. Too smart by half. It was the bonus he was after, helping out the depot was just so much eyewash. It hasn't worked, though..."

Everyone began to shout and yell at once. I went away. After all, why eavesdrop?

Hearing voices behind me, I hurried on. The meeting was over, but the men were still arguing excitedly. I heard Alibek's voice: he was speaking with great conviction.

"We'll make brakes for the trailers right here in the garage, there's nothing to it, all we have to do is make an extension-line from the compressor and install brake shoes. Hey, is that you, Ilyas? I say, Ilyas," Alibek called out.

Without slackening my pace I strode to the garage. Alibek caught up with me and grabbed me by the shoulder.

"Whew, you're a devil to catch! Look, I've convinced them after all. Get ready, Ilyas. Will you come as my mate on the trial run with a trailer? How about it?

I resented this too: so I was a failure who needed pulling out of a hole, and he'd give me a leg-up, would he?

Roughly, I shook off his hand.

"Go to hell, you and your trailers."

"What's eating you? It was all your own fault... Oh yes, I forgot. Did Volodya Shirayev say any thing to you?"

"No, I haven't seen him. Why?"

"I like that! Where have you been all this time? Asel's been watching out for you on the road, asking

all drivers if they haven't seen you, she's worried sick."

My legs all but gave way under me. I felt so wretched so unutterably disgusted with myself. I wished I were dead. Alibek was tugging at my sleeve, talking on and on about some gadgets or something we could fit on trailers... Djantai was standing a few feet away, listening to our conversation.

"Let go of me," I jerked my arm free. "Leave me alone, dammit. I'm fed up to the teeth. You can keep your trailers. And I'm not going to be anyone's mate... That clear enough?"

Alibek clenched his teeth so hard that the muscles in his cheek twitched.

"You started it, you made the mess and now you want to run? Is that it?" he demanded.

"Take it any way you like."

I went to my lorry. My hands shook and my mind in a haze. Without knowing why I did it, I jumped the pit under it and leaned my head against the brick wall to cool it.

"I say, Ilyas," a whisper came from above.

Who the devil was it now? I raised my head and Djantai in his red-fox hat. He was squatting on the edge of the pit like an old toadstool, peering at me with his crafty, narrow eyes.

"You certainly showed him where to get off, Ilyas."

"Who?"

"Why, Alibek, of course. You shut him up all right the damned innovator."

"And what business is it of yours?"

"The same as yours: that trailer-towing business is no use to us drivers, you know it as well as I do. It's always the same: one man takes on a bigger load, makes the run in less time, and everyone is expected to do the same, but they'll cut down the rates, so why the hell be one's own enemy? The glory will last a day, and then what? Just stick to your line, we're not holding it against you..."

"Who's we?" I asked as calmly as I could. "D'you mean yourself?"

"No, not me alone," Djantai said, blinking rapidly.

"You're lying, you lousy worm! I'll tow a trailer over the pass just to spite you. I'll do it if it kills me. And now, get out of here! I'll get my hands on you yet!"

"Hey, none of that stuff from you," Djantai snapped at me. "You're so damned virtuous, don't I know it! And about that other thing, have your fun while it lasts."

Cursing, I hit him on the jaw with all my might.

He fell over backwards. His hat rolled away. I swung over the edge of the pit and made for him, but he had already scrambled to his feet and side-stepped me. He started screaming at the top of his voice.

"Help! You hooligan, you thug! They'll lock you up for this! Working your spite off on people ... you think you'll get away with it...

People came running from all over the place. Alibek came too.

"What's going on here? Why did you hit him?" he asked me.

"For speaking the truth," Djantai shrieked on. "For speaking the truth to his face. He stole the trailer, ditched it in the mountains, wrecked the whole business, and now that honest people want to correct his mistake he starts a fight not to let them! There's no glory coming to him now, it won't pay him."

Alibek turned on me. He was pale and stuttered with fury.

"You swine," he pushed me in the chest. "We'll manage without you, never worry. Without heroes..."

I said nothing. I was speechless. Djantai's barefaced lie had so stunned me that I could not utter a sound. The men glared at me.

To get away, anything to get away from here... I leapt into my lorry and roared out of the yard.

On the road, I got drunk. I had one drink at a

roadside place but it did not help, so I stopped at the next one and downed a full tumbler of vodka. And then I was aware of nothing but bridges, road signs and cars flashing past me. Things looked brighter. "Oh, to hell with everything," I thought. "Take things easy and keep your hands on the wheel... And Kadicha... She's no worse than others. She's young and good-looking. And she loves you, she's crazy about you... There's nothing she wouldn't do for you, you ungrateful fool."

It was late when I got home. I stood in the doorway, swaying on my feet, my sheepskin off one arm and hanging down my back. It's easier driving sometimes with the right arm out of the sleeve. I've had the habit since I was a kid shooting stones with a sling-shot.

Asel came running to me.

"Ilyas, what's wrong?" she asked, but then, I think, she understood. "Well, why do you just stand there? You must be cold and tired. Take your coat off."

She wanted to help me, but I pushed her away without saying anything. I was so ashamed, I had to take refuge in rudeness. I staggered across the room, overturning a stool or something with a clatter, and sank heavily on a chair.

"Has anything happened, Ilyas?" Asel looked anxiously into my drunken eyes.

"As if you didn't know," I dropped my head: it was better not to look at her. I sat there and waited for Asel to start scolding and cursing me. I was willing to hear anything from her and put up no defence. But she remained so silent, she may not have been in the room at all. I looked up. She was standing by the window, her back to me. Even without seeing her face I knew she was crying. It wrung my heart.

"Look, Asel, I want to tell you something," I began falteringly. "I want to say..." No, I had not the guts to tell her. I could not deal her such a blow. But I ought not to have spared her... "I don't think we'll be able to

go to your people soon," I said, side-tracking the issue. "Later perhaps. I can't be bothered with the preparations now..."

"There's no hurry, we can go later," Asel replied. She wiped her eyes and came up close. "Don't worry about it now, Ilyas. Everything will be all right. You'd better take a look at yourself. You've become so strange lately. You're different, Ilyas."

"Drop it," I cut her short, vexed by my own cowardice. "I'm tired, I want to sleep."

On my return trip, a couple of days later, I met Alibek on the other side of the pass. He was towing a trailer. He had made the Dolon pass.

He jumped out, the lorry still moving, when he saw me, and waved. I slowed down. He stood in the middle of the road--jubilant and happy.

"Hello, Ilyas," he called out. "Climb down, let's have a smoke."

I slowed down. In his cab I saw a second driver, a very young chap. They had put chains on the lorry wheels and pneumatic brakes on the trailer. I took it all in at a glance. But I did not get out, no fear. You made it--well and good, just leave me alone.

"Hey, wait," Alibek shouted, running after me. "Ilyas, stop, I want to talk to you, it's business. Why don't you stop, you devil? Oh, all right..."

I put on speed. Don't yell. I have no business with you. I acted stupidly then, I lost a fine friend in Alibek, the best friend I had. He was right, right about everything, I realise it now. But at the time I could not forgive him for succeeding so effortlessly and quickly where I had failed after so much exertion, toil and nervous strain.

Alibek has always been a serious, thinking type. He never would have rushed into the thing in my headlong, lone-hand fashion. It was wise of him, too, to take a second driver along. They could take turns at the wheel and rest. The decisive factor here was the engine, the strength of the driver's will and

hands. Besides, with the two of them driving, the run would take them half the time it usually took. Alibek had figured it all out. He had fitted brakes on the trailer, nor did he forget to put chains, ordinary chains, on the rear wheels. He had launched his attack on the Dolon pass fully armed, he was not taking any chances.

Before long other drivers began to tow trailers over the pass after Alibek had shown the way. In any business the main thing is to start the thing going. Meanwhile, more lorries arrived from the nearest motor depot to help us out. For the next ten days the Tien Shan road hummed with traffic, day and night. Well, to cut a long story short, the Chinese workers had their equipment delivered to them on time, our fellows did not fail them. I worked too. Now that all these years have passed I can talk about it calmly, but in those hectic days I was too unnerved to keep in the saddle. I lost control and turned my horse in the wrong direction.

When I arrived back at the depot after that meeting with Alibek, it was already getting dark. I went to the hostel, but on my way there dropped into the pub. All those days I had a terrible urge to drink myself senseless, to forget everything and sleep the sleep of the dead. I drank a lot of vodka but it hardly affected me. I left the pub feeling more upset and sore than ever. I started across the town in the middle of the night and without hesitation turned down Beregovaya Street, to Kadicha's.

And so it went on. I was between the devil and the deep sea. In the day-time I drove the lorry, and after work went straight to Kadicha. With her I felt more secure, more at ease, I took shelter with her from myself, from people, from the truth. I believed that Kadicha alone loved and understood me. I never stayed home longer than I could help. Asel, my darling Asel! She could not know that she was driving me out of the house with her trustfulness, her

innocence. Knowing that I was unworthy of her, that I did not deserve what she was doing for me, I could not face her. I came home drunk several times. She did not reproach me. Until this day it beats me why? Was it weakness on her part or, on the contrary, courage and faith? It was faith, of course, she believed I would pull myself together, master the crisis and come back to normal. But she ought to have cursed me and forced me to confess the truth. Maybe she would have done it if she had known that I had other troubles, unconnected with my work. She had no inkling of what I was going through. And I wanted to spare her, I kept putting off the moment when I should tell her until tomorrow, until another time, and then it was too late to do what I owed her, owed our love, our family...

On that last day, Asel met me at the door looking happy and excited. She was flushed, her eyes were shining. She dragged me into the room as I was, in my sheepskins and boots.

"Look, Ilyas, Samat can stand up alone!"

"Honest? Where is he?"

"There, under the table."

"But he's crawling on all fours," I said.

"You shall see! Come on, Samat, show Daddy how you can stand. Come along, son, come to me."

Samat understood what his mother wanted of him. With a big grin he quickly crawled out from under the table and, holding on to the leg of the bed, stood upright. He stood there for a minute, smiling and swaying on his plump little legs, and then with the same brave smile on his face, flopped down on the floor. I dashed to him, picked him up and hugged him, delighting in his sweet baby smell. That smell was so dear, as dear as Asel.

"Ilyas, careful, you'll squash him!" Asel took the baby away. "Well, what do you think of him? Come on, take off your coat. He'll be a big boy soon, and then his mummy will go to work too. Everything will be all

right, everything will be fine, won't it, sonny boy? And look at you!" Asel turned to me with a wistful smile. I took the nearest chair. I realised that into those few words she had put all she had wanted to say to me, all the bitterness that had accumulated in her soul in those bad days. There was a plea in those words, reproach and hope. I had to tell her everything at once or leave immediately. It was better to leave. She was very happy, she had no suspicions. I got up.

"I'll be going," I said.

"Where to?" she asked, startled. "You won't stay tonight either? Have some tea at least."

"I can't. I have to go," I mumbled. "You know how busy we are just now..."

Work had nothing to do with it. I did not have to show up until next morning.

When I got to my lorry, I sank heavily onto the seat and fumbled for a long time with the ignition key, groaning from the misery of it all. I drove out into the road and away, leaving the lighted windows of my home far behind me. Down in the gorge, beyond the bridge, I turned off the road, drove into a clump of bushes and switched off my headlights. I decided to spend the night there. I got out my cigarettes and discovered there was just one match left in the box. When I struck it, the tiny flame went out before I could light my cigarette. I threw both the packet of cigarettes and the empty match-box out of the window, pulled my sheepskin over my head, and curled up on the seat.

A glum-looking moon hung above the cold, distant mountains. The wind running through the gorge gave a thin, mournful wail now and then and swung the half open door of the cab. The door creaked in motion. Never had I felt so utterly alone, so isolated from people, from my family and friends. I could not go on living like that. I swore I'd have it out with Kadicha as soon as I got back to the depot. I'd beg her to forgive me and forget all there had been between

us. That would be honest and right.

But fate decided differently. I never thought matters would take the turn they did. When I came home the next day I found the door open but no one in. At first I simply thought that Asel had gone out for a minute to fetch firewood or water. But then I looked about me. The room was in disorder. There was something chilling about the black, empty range. I ran to Samat's bed--he wasn't there.

"Asel," I whispered in my terror. "Asel," the walls whispered in reply.

I rushed out, calling, "Asel, Asel!"

No one answered. I ran to the neighbours, then on to the filling station, but no one knew anything. All they could tell me was this: Asel went out somewhere the day before, leaving the baby with friends, and only came back late in the evening. "She has found out and left me," I shuddered as the awful truth dawned on me.

I don't think I ever drove across the Tien Shan as fast as I did that day. I was urged on by the thought that I would overtake her around the next bend, or in the next gorge, or further on down the road. Like an eagle I pounced on the lorries I overtook, slowed down until we practically touched mudguards, peered into the cabs, and shot forward again, followed by the drivers' curses. Without a pause I raced on like that for about three hours, until the water began to boil in the radiator. I shovelled snow on it and went to the back of the lorry to get my emergency water supply. Steam rose from the radiator and the engine panted like a winded horse. Just as I was getting back behind the wheel I saw Alibek's lorry with a trailer in tow coming down the road. That was a piece of luck. Although we were not on speaking terms, Alibek would tell me if Asel was at their place.

I ran out into the middle of the road and raised my hand.

"Hello, Alibek, stop, will you!"

His mate, who was driving, looked questioningly at Alibek. He frowned and turned away. The lorry sped past me. Covered with snow dust from head to foot I just stood there with my hand raised. At last, I wiped my face. Oh well, I had it coming to me. I was past minding. The thought uppermost in my mind was that Asel was not at Alibek's. That made it worse. She must have gone home to her people then, there was nowhere else for her to go. How did she cross that threshold, what did she tell them?

I had to follow her there at once.

Unloading as quickly as I could, I left the lorry in the street and hurried to the dispatcher's office to hand in the documents. In the gate, I collided with Djantai--oh how I hated that insolent smirk of his.

Kadicha gave me a queer sort of look when I appeared in her little window and dropped the papers on her desk. There was alarm, or guilt perhaps, in her eyes.

"Sign it quickly, please," I said.

"Is something the matter?"

"She's not at home. Asel's gone."

"Oh no!" Kadicha turned pale. She stood up and said, biting her lips: "Forgive me, Ilyas, forgive me. It's my fault."

"What is? Tell me everything," I said, and ran to door.

"It just happened, I can't explain it, honestly, Ilyas. Last night, the watchman came and knocked on window and said a girl wanted to see me. I knew at once it was Asel. She stared at me in silence at first, and then she asked: 'Is it true?' And then something came over me and I said: 'Yes, it's true. All of it is true. He's been with me.' She flinched. And I fell across this desk here, sobbing out like an idiot: 'He's mine, mine.' I not see her go. Oh, forgive me, Ilyas!"

"Wait a minute, but how did she find out?"

"It was Djantai. I know it was, because he threatened he'd do it. Don't you know what a rotten

person he is? Go find her, Ilyas, go to her, I shan't stand in your way any more. I'll go away from here."

I flew across the wintry steppe. The ground was frozen blue. The wind whipped the tops of snow-drifts into horses' manes and blew the homeless tumble-weeds out of the ditches and away. In the distance I saw the dark silhouettes of the weather-worn mud walls and the bare-branched orchards of the village.

I stopped near Asel's home, hastily lit a cigarette to calm my nerves, then pinched it out and sounded my horn. It was not Asel who came out. It was her mother, wrapped in a coat. I stood on the running-board and said quietly: "Good evening, *apa*."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she demanded wrathfully. "And you have the impudence to call me *apa* after all you've done? Out of here, out of my sight! You loafer, you snake in the grass! Seducing my little girl and now having the gall to come here! You've wrecked our lives..."

The old woman gave me no chance to get a word in. She went on swearing at me, using the cruellest words she knew. The neighbours heard her screaming and a crowd began to gather.

"Get going before I call people in to kick you out! Go in disgrace and never let me see you here again!" The infuriated woman threw her coat down on the ground and crowded me back into the cab.

There was nothing I could do but get in behind the wheel. I had to go since Asel would not even come out and talk to me. Sticks and stones came flying at the lorry. The village children were giving me a send-off.

Until late into the night I walked up and down the lake shore. The moonlit Issyk-Kul was in a restless mood, tossing and heaving. A hot lake always, it was cold that night, chilly and unfriendly. I sat down on an overturned boat. The waves ran up the shore in angry billows, slapped at my boots and retreated with a regretful sigh.

And then, someone came up behind me and placed

a gentle hand on my shoulder. It was Kadicha.

* * *

A few days later we left for Frunze, and there got jobs with an expedition that was investigating the possible development of the Anarkhai steppe for pastures. I was to be a lorry driver and Kadicha an odd-jobs worker. And that is how we began our new life together.

The expedition travelled to the very heart of the Anarkhai steppe, it was somewhere in the region of Lake Balkhash. The farther, the better, as far as I was concerned. If a break had to be made with the past, let it be a clean break.

In the beginning I tried to drown my sorrow in work. And there was plenty of work there. In the three odd years I was with that expedition we travelled the length and breadth of the vast steppe, sinking wells, laying roads, and building trans-shipping bases. Anarkhai is no longer the wilderness it used to be, where a man could lose his way in broad daylight and wander about the monotonous, hilly steppe overgrown with wormwood for a whole month or more before he struck habitation. Today it's a land of cattle-breeders with good houses, cultural centres, and everything. They plant grain crops too nowadays, and even stock hay. There's any amount of work there still, especially for us drivers. But I came back. And not because I got sick of roughing it there, no, that was a temporary inconvenience. Kadicha and I were not afraid of hardships, and I must say that we got on well together, we respected and liked one another. However, respect is one thing and love is quite another. Even if one of the couple is very much in love while the other is not, it's no life, the way I see it. Such is human nature, or maybe it's the way I'm made, but I always felt there was something lacking.

And that something cannot be compensated either by work, friendship, or the kindness and affection of a loving woman. I soon began to regret that foolhardy decision of mine to leave without making another attempt to win back Asel. In those last six months in Anarkhai my longing for Asel and the boy became unendurable. I could not sleep. I kept seeing Samat, smiling and swaying on his plump little legs. His sweet baby smell was something I would remember all my life. I longed to get back to my beloved Tien Shans, to my blue Issyk-Kul, to the steppe where I once met my first and only love. Kadicha knew how I felt but did not hold it against me. Finally, we both realised that we could not go on living together.

Spring came very early to Anarkhai that year. The snow melted quickly and the hills turned green. The steppe was coming back to life, absorbing the welcome warmth and moisture. At night the air seemed transparent, the sky was spangled with stars.

We were in bed in our tent near the derrick. It was another of my sleepless nights. Suddenly, in the silence of the steppe, I heard a very distant, barely audible train whistle. How that sound ever reached me can hardly be explained. From where we were it was a twelve hours' drive to the railway. Maybe it was my imagination, I don't know. Whatever it was, it made my heart beat faster, it told me to get going.

"Kadicha, I'm going away."

"Yes, Ilyas, we have to part," she answered.

And we did part. Kadicha went to northern Kazakhstan, to the virgin lands. I want her to be happy. I honestly hope and believe that one day she'll find the man who, without being aware of it, is waiting for her somewhere. She had bad luck with her first husband, and she had been no happier with me. I would have probably remained with Kadicha if I had not known what real love was, what it was to love a woman and be loved by her. It's the sort of thing you can't put into words.

I took Kadicha to the train and saw her off. I ran beside it while it gathered speed. "Good luck, Kadicha, don't think too badly of me," I whispered to her for the last time.

The cranes were flying south from Anarkhai, and I was headed north, to the Tien Shan mountains.

* * *

When I arrived in those parts, the first thing I did was thumb a ride to Asel's village. Riding in the back of the lorry I tried to chase all thoughts away. I felt both frightened and elated. We were going along the same road where I used to meet Asel. It was no longer a country road though, it was a gravelled highway with concrete bridges and road signs. But I missed the old road. The spot where my lorry got stuck in the mud that day long ago was unrecognisable, nor did I see the boulder where Asel once sat waiting for me.

I banged on the cab roof when we were nearing the village.

"What's wrong?" the driver asked, poking out his head.

"Stop, will you, I want to get off here."

"Out here in the field? Why, we're almost there."

"Thanks, but I'll walk, it's not far," I said jumping down to the ground. I offered him some money.

"Keep it," he said. "We don't take money from our own fellows."

"Just take it. How d'you know I'm a driver?"

"It's written all over you."

"All right. Good luck!"

He drove on. And I stood there in the middle of the road, mustering my courage. With shaking hands I lit a cigarette. I drew hard on it, again and again. "Here I am," I said aloud, stamping out the cigarette. I

walked to the village. My heart hammered so loudly it hurt my eardrums. I literally couldn't hear myself think.

There were noticeable changes in the village: it had grown larger and had many new houses with slate roofs. Electric wires stretched from house to house. There was a radio loudspeaker mounted on a pole outside the *kolkhoz* office. Children were hurrying to school. A group of older pupils, walking along with their teacher, were busily discussing something. Maybe the kids who had once thrown sticks and stones at me were among them too. Yes, time marches on, it never stands still.

I walked faster. There was the mud wall now and the willow trees in the yard. I paused for breath. My blood ran cold from dread. I hesitantly approached the gate and knocked. A girl carrying a school-bag came running out. It was the same girl that had once stuck her tongue out at me--a big schoolgirl now. She was in a hurry. With a puzzled glance at me, she said:

"There's no one at home."

"No one at all?"

"No, *Apa's* gone on a visit to the lumber camp. And father's delivering water to the tractors in the fields."

"And Asel?" I asked timidly, my mouth suddenly going dry.

"Who, Asel?" the girl sounded surprised. "Why, she left ages ago."

"And never came back?"

"She comes home every year with *djezde*. *Apa* says he's a very fine man."

I asked no more. The girl ran on to school and I turned back the way I had come.

The news was so staggering that the name of the man she had married and her whereabouts seemed of no importance. Why ask? Somehow, the idea that Asel might find another man had never occurred to me. And yet I should have expected it. After all, why waste

years waiting for me to turn up.

I decided to walk back rather than wait about for a lorry going my way.

The road had certainly changed, it was smooth and hard. The steppe alone remained the same with its dark patches of autumn-ploughed land and lighter ones covered with faded stubble. It rolled away from the mountains to the horizon in sweeping, gentle billows, ending in a pale fringe where it ran into the shores of the distant Issyk-Kul. The snow had left the ground damp and bare. Tractors could be heard rumbling where the spring ploughing was under way.

It was night when I got to the district centre. In the morning my mind was made up: I would go back to work at the motor depot. All was finished, all was lost. At the moment I had to live and work, and the future would take care of itself...

As usual the Tien Shan road hummed with traffic, there was an endless chain of lorries going my way but I wanted one from our depot. At last one came along and I raised my hand.

The driver shot past, then braked abruptly. I picked up my suitcase and the man came towards me. It was Ermek, a chap from my regiment, I taught him how to drive back in the army. He looked at me with a tentative smile.

"Don't you know me?" I asked.

"You're... you're Sergeant... Ilyas. Ilyas Alybayev," he remembered at last.

"None other," I said with a bitter smile: I must have changed a good deal if it was so difficult to recognise me.

As we rode on we talked of this and that, recalling our army days. I was afraid he might start asking me awkward questions, but evidently he had not heard anything. That was a relief.

"When did you come home?" I asked.

"I've been on this job for more than two years now."

"Where's Alibek Djanturin, do you know?"

"No, I don't. He left before my time. I hear he's working as chief mechanic at a depot in the Pamirs somewhere."

"Good for Alibek!" I thought. "Good for you, friend. You're a real *djigit*." So he got where he wanted after all. He finished a correspondence course at a transport technical school.

"Is Amanjolov still the director?"

"No, we have a new man. Amanjolov has been promoted to the Ministry."

"D'you think they'll take me on?" I asked.

"Sure, why not. You're a first-class driver, in the army they thought a lot of you, you know."

"Yes, they did, once," I said under my breath. "Do you know Djantai?"

"No, I've never heard the name."

"So much has changed at the depot," I thought, and then asked: "Do you tow trailers over the pass?"

"Sure. It depends on the load," Ermek answered lightly. "When the need arises we take a trailer in tow, sure. We've got powerful lorries now."

He had no idea what those trailers had cost me.

And so I came back to my old depot. Ermek invited me to his place and offered me a drink to celebrate our meeting, but I declined. I never touch the stuff now.

The people at the depot were quite decent to me. I was very grateful to those who knew all about me for not pestering me with questions. They seemed to be thinking: here is a fellow who has come back after getting a taste of life elsewhere, he does his work conscientiously, and that's good enough for us. Let bygones be bygones. I, too, tried hard to forget everything, to forget it all completely. I would speed past the trans-shipping base, where once I had lived with my family, without looking to left or right, and never stopping for petrol at the filling station there. But nothing was any good.

I could not deceive myself.

I had already been back at the depot some time, I was settling down, I knew my lorry inside and out, had tried the engine at all speeds and on all the roads. In short, I knew my job.

That day I was driving back from China. There was nothing on my mind, I just rolled along, smoking and gazing about me. It was spring, and a beautiful day. The sheep-breeders were moving to summer pastures and I could see their yurtas in the distance, with bluish smoke curling up from some of them. The wind carried the restless neighing of horses. Flocks of sheep were grazing not far from the road. The scene brought back memories of childhood. I felt a little sad... When I drove out to the lake I was stunned--there were swans on Issyk-Kul.

It was only the second time that I had seen swans on the lake in spring. The white birds were circling over the deep-blue water. Without thinking, I swerved off the road and drove straight across country to the lake as on that day so long ago.

Oh, Issyk-Kul, my Issyk-Kul--my unfinished song! Why did I have to remember that day when I came here with Asel and stopped on the same rise, right above the water? Everything was the same. The blue-and-white waves ran up the yellow shore holding hands. The sun was setting behind the mountains, and at the far end of the lake the water was tinged with pink. The swans wheeled over the water with excited, exultant cries. They soared up and dropped down on outspread wings that seemed to hum. They whipped up the water and started wide, foaming circles. Everything was the same, only there was no Asel with me. Where are you, my slender poplar in a red kerchief, where are you now?

I was there a long time, and then I drove back to the depot. My nerves gave way and I got drunk again... Once again I went to the pub to deaden my reawakened pain with vodka. It was late when I left

the place. The sky was dark and clouded. The wind came tearing from the gorge as from a pipe, it grappled madly with the trees, howled in the electric wires, and threw handfuls of pebbles into my face. The lake was groaning and gasping. I got to the hostel at last and, without bothering to undress, fell on my bed and slept.

The next morning I had such a hangover I could not lift my head. There was a thin, nasty drizzle outside, half-rain half-snow. I lay awake for about three hours, reluctant to go to work. That was the first time that even work offered me no solace. But then I felt ashamed of myself and got up.

The lorry went at a sluggish pace, or, rather, it was my mind that was sluggish, and the weather was rotten too. The cars I met had snow on them, evidently snow had fallen in the mountains. Let it fall, let there be a blizzard for all I cared, it was all up with me anyway, so why worry ...

My mood could not have been fouler. The sight of my face in the wind-screen mirror made me sick: a bloated, flabby, unhealthy face with a stubble of beard on it. I ought to have stopped and had a meal on the road. I had not eaten anything that day, but I was not hungry. A drink appealed to me more. You know how it is, give in to the craving once and it's hard to stop. I felt better after that first glass. The car, too, went at a livelier pace, I dropped in at the next place I came to, had a tumblerful and then another one. The road flew past me now, and the wind-screen wipers flickered back and forth before my eyes. I crouched over the wheel, sucking on a cigarette that had long gone out, aware of nothing but the oncoming cars flying past me and spattering my windows with mud. I stepped on the accelerator, it was getting late. Darkness overtook me in the mountains. It was a starless, gloomy night. The vodka I'd had began to tell. I was getting tired. There was a whirl of black spots before my eyes, blotting out the

road. It was stuffy inside the cab, I wanted to retch. I had never been so drunk before. Sweat came pouring down my face. I had the feeling of riding on the twin rays of light streaming from my head-lights and not driving a lorry at all. Riding those rays, I would take a sheer drop into a deep, lighted chasm, clamber up the wavering rays that slithered up and down the rock face, and follow their weaving, zigzag path. I was growing weaker with every minute, but I did not stop because I knew that once I slackened my grip on the wheel I would lose control. I can't remember exactly where I was then, it was somewhere in the pass. Ah Dolon, Dolon, you giant of the Tien Shans! You certainly are difficult. Especially at night, and more especially for a drunken driver.

Vibrating with the strain, the lorry got to the top of a rise and started rolling downhill. Everything went round and round, the black sky seemed to overturn. My hands no longer obeyed me. Gathering momentum, the lorry flew down the slope. I heard a dull crash, a metallic grating, the headlights flared up once and then darkness enveloped me. "I've crashed," the thought was a pin-prick in the depths of my consciousness.

I don't know how long I lay there. All I remember is suddenly hearing a voice that sounded muffled and far away as though my ears were stopped with cotton. "Here, give me a light," the voice said. Hands felt my head, my shoulders and chest. "He's alive but dead drunk." Another voice said: "We've got to clear the road."

"Come on, friend, try and move over, we'll get the lorry out of the way," the man said, giving my shoulder a slight push.

Groaning, I raised my head. Blood trickled down my face from a cut on my forehead. Something in my chest wouldn't let me straighten up. The man struck a match and took a look at me. He then struck a second match and looked again.

"Bad, too bad. How did you get that way, fellow?" in the darkness he sounded sorry for me.

"Is the car badly damaged?" I asked, spitting blood.

"No, not very. It skidded across the road, that's all."

"Well, then, I'll be going, I shan't block the road," I said, trying to turn the ignition key with fingers that shook badly.

"Come along," the man said, putting a strong arm about my shoulders. "You've done enough damage. Come on. You'll stay the night at my place, and in the morning we shall see."

The two of them dragged me out of the cab.

"Kemel, drive the lorry to the side of the road, we'll see to it later."

He jacked me up on his shoulder and dragged me along. I could not tell where we were going in the darkness. After a long trudge we got to his place. The man helped me through the door. A paraffin lamp was burning in the front room. My host made me sit on a stool and began to unbutton my sheepskin for me. I looked at him then and remembered. He was Baitemir, the road master, the man whose lorry I had once towed over the pass. Though ashamed of my condition, I was glad to see him again. I opened my mouth to apologise and thank him, when the clatter of logs being dropped on the floor behind me made me turn and look. Slowly, with an effort, I got to my feet, feeling as though something too heavy for me to bear had descended on my shoulders. In the doorway stood Asel with the logs scattered at her feet. She stood unnaturally erect and stared at me dumbly.

"Why... why..." she whispered.

I almost shouted, "Asel!" but the look in her eyes was so forbidding and aloof that I could not utter a sound. I dropped my head, burning with shame. That moment of silence was terrible. Baitemir broke the spell. He made me sit down again, and said calmly to

Asel:

"It's nothing, Asel! This lorry driver had a slight accident and he just needs a rest... Bring us some iodine, will you."

"Iodine? The neighbour has borrowed it, but I'll go and get it," her voice acquired warmer and more worried overtones.

I sat there without moving or speaking. My drunken stupor was gone, I had sobered up with a jolt. My blood pounded in my temples.

"We must bathe the wounds first," Baitemir said, examining the cut on my forehead. He took a pail and went out. A barefooted boy about five, wearing nothing but a singlet, peeped out of the next room. He stared at me curiously. I knew him at once. I can't explain how I knew, it must have been my heart that told me.

"Samat," I forced out the word in a whisper and held out my arms to my boy. Just then Baitemir appeared in the doorway, and I flinched away in fear, I don't know why. I was afraid he had heard me calling Samat by name. I felt like a thief caught in the act of stealing. In my confusion, I covered the cut on my forehead with a hand and suddenly heard myself asking:

"Your son?"

Now, why did I have to ask that? I can't forgive myself to this day.

"Yes, he's my boy," Baitemir replied with a host's geniality. He put down the pail and picked up Samat in his arms. "Sure, he's my boy, my own boy, aren't you, Samat?" he said, kissing the boy and tickling his neck with his moustache. There was not a shade of suspicion or insincerity in Baitemir's manner and speech. "Why aren't you asleep? My curious little colt, so you had to come out and see? Now off you go, back to bed!"

"Where's Mummy?" Samat wanted to know.

"She'll be back in a minute. There she is now. Go

along, sonny.

Asel came running in to the room. She took the scene in with a quick, suspicious look, handed Baitemir the bottle of iodine without a word, and took Samat off to bed.

Baitemir wet a towel and wiped the blood off my face.

"Don't yell now," he smiled, painting the cuts with iodine, and then continued sternly: "You should get it really hot for that business, but you're our guest so never mind. Will you give us some tea, Asel?"

"In a minute."

Baitemir spread a quilt on the felt carpet and dropped a cushion on it.

"Sit down and relax," he said.

"Thanks, don't bother about me," I mumbled in reply.

"Come on, sit down, make yourself at home," he insisted.

It was a perfect nightmare. I could hardly breathe because a hand seemed to be gripping my heart. My nerves were taut with apprehension. Oh why was I ever born!

Asel came back into the room and, trying not to look at us, took the samovar and carried it into the yard.

"I'll come and help, Asel," Baitemir called after her. He got up to go, but Samat came running in again. He had no intention of going to sleep, it seemed.

"What do you want now, Samat?" Baitemir asked with gentle reproach.

"Uncle, did you come straight out of a film?" my son asked me earnestly and came up closer for a better look.

I guessed what he meant. Baitemir did, too, and burst out laughing.

"Oh you silly baby," Baitemir laughed, squatting down in front of the boy. "You are a scream honestly."

He turned to me and said: "We take him along when we go to the film shows at the mines."

"Yes, I've come straight out of a film," I said, joining in the fun.

"That's not true," Samat declared, frowning.

"Why isn't it true?"

"Because where's the sword you fought with?"

"I left it at home."

"Will you show it to me? Show me tomorrow?"

"I will. Come here. Your name is Samat, isn't it?"

"Yes. And what's yours?"

"I am..." I stopped. "I'm Uncle Ilyas," the words stuck in my throat.

"Go to bed, Samat, it's really getting late," Baitemir told him.

"Let me stay a little longer, Daddy," Samat begged.

"Oh, all right. We'll bring in the tea now."

Samat came and stood beside me. I stroked his hand. He looked like me, very much so. His hands, too, were like mine, and his laugh.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked, to get into some sort of conversation with my son.

"A lorry driver."

"Do you like riding in a car?"

"I like it very, very much... Only no one takes me when I raise my hand."

"I'll give you a ride tomorrow. Want to come?"

"Oh yes. I'll give you some of my knucklebones," he said and trotted off to his room to get them.

Out in the yard, the samovar funnel was spitting tongues of flame. Asel and Baitemir were talking quietly.

Samat returned with a small goatskin bag in which he kept his knucklebones.

"Choose any ones you like," he said, spilling his brightly coloured riches before me.

I wanted to take one for a souvenir but I didn't

dare. The door was kicked open and Baitemir appeared carrying the steaming samovar. Asel followed him in. She busied herself making the tea while Baitemir placed a low round table on the felt carpet and put a tablecloth on. Samat and I collected the knucklebones back into the bag.

"You've been boasting of your wealth, I see. Oh you little braggart, you!" Baitemir tweaked Samat's ear fondly.

Tea was ready and we all sat down. Asel and I pretended we had never met. We tried to appear calm, and that was perhaps why we said nothing most of the time. Samat had climbed into Baitemir's lap and was cuddling up to him, twisting his head this way and that.

"Ouch, Daddy, your moustache always prickles so," Samat complained, but he would not leave Baitemir alone, and thrust his face into his moustache again and again.

It was no easy thing for me to sit there so near my son whom I dared not call that, and hear him calling another man Father. It was no easy thing to know that though Asel, my darling Asel, was there beside me I had no right to look straight into her eyes. How did she come to be here? Did she marry this man for love? She gave no sign that she knew me and treated me like a total stranger, so how could I learn anything? Did she hate me so? And Baitemir: had he no suspicions about me? Didn't he see how like me Samat was? Why did he make no mention of that encounter of ours when I towed his car? Had he honestly forgotten?

When we settled down for the night, I felt more miserable still. I had a bed made up for me right there on the felt carpet, and I lay with my face turned to the wall. The lamp was turned low and Asel was tidying up after the meal.

"Asel," Baitemir called softly from the bedroom.

She went to the door.

"Wash his shirt, will you?"

Asel took my blood-smeared checked shirt and started washing it, but she stopped almost at once and went into the bedroom.

"Did you let the radiator water out?" I heard her speaking quietly to Baitemir. "It may freeze..."

"Kemel has done that," Baitemir answered as quietly. "There's hardly any damage to the lorry. We'll see to it in the morning."

I had forgotten about the water, but my mind was not on motors just then.

Asel finished washing my shirt, and as she hung it to dry over the stove she heaved a deep sigh. Then she blew out the lamp and went into the bedroom.

The house grew dark. I know that none of us slept that night. Each of us was alone with his thoughts. Baitemir had Samat in bed with him. I could hear him whispering tenderly to the boy and tucking him in when he tossed and kicked off the covers. Now and again Asel sighed audibly. I seemed to see her limpid eyes in the darkness, brimming with tears. What was she thinking about, who was in her thoughts? She now had three of us... Maybe her memory, like mine, was bringing back to her all those beautiful and bitter things that bound us together. But she was out of reach now, and her thoughts were out of my reach too. She had changed, her eyes had changed. They were no longer the same trusting eyes, shining with innocence and candour. There was sternness in them now. But she was still my Asel, my sweet young poplar. Her every movement, every word was dear and precious to me. I felt more bitterly regretful, more wretched than ever. I bit hard on a corner of the pillow and lay thus, without sleep all night.

Through the window I watched the moon dive in and out of the gathering clouds.

Asel and Baitemir got up very early, and as soon as they went out into the yard to do their household duties, I got up too. It was time to leave. Stealthily, I

tiptoed to Samat, kissed him, and quickly left the room.

Out in the yard Asel was filling a large pot with water, and Baitemir was chopping wood for the stone hearth on which it stood. He and I went to where we'd left the lorry. We smoked as we walked and neither of us said anything.

I had hit the road posts, I saw, knocking down a couple of them together with their concrete bases. The lorry had a smashed headlight, a dented mudguard and bumper, and a jammed wheel. With a crowbar and hammer for tools we repaired the damage as far as we were able. What we had to do next was a tedious job. The engine was frozen dead. We burned cotton waste to warm up the oil pump, and together turned the crank again and again to start it. Our shoulders touched, the palms of our hands were hot from turning the same crank, we breathed into each other's face, we worked for the same purpose, and perhaps we were thinking of the same thing.

The engine refused to co-operate. We were getting out of breath. Asel brought us two pails of hot water. She put them down before me without a word, and stood aside. I poured the water into the radiator. Baitemir and I had another go at the crank, one more, and at last the engine caught. I got in to the cab. The engine was working fitfully. Baitemir raised the bonnet to check the sparkplugs. At that moment Samat ran up panting, his overcoat flying. He ran around the lorry, obviously dying for a ride. Asel caught him and without releasing her hold on him stood beside the cab. She gave me a look so eloquent with reproach, pain and compassion, that I would have done anything in the world then to get them back and make up for the wrong I had done them.

"Asel," I said, leaning out of the open cab door. "Take the boy and get in. I'll take you away like that first time, I'll take you away for ever. Please, Asel," I

begged her, the roar of the motor drowning the sound of my voice for Baitemir.

Asel said nothing. Her eyes were swimming; she looked away and shook her head.

"Come on, Mummy, let's go for a ride," Samat cried, tugging at her hand.

She walked away with drooping head, and never looked back. Samat did not want to go home, he tried to pull free and run back.

Baitemir slammed down the bonnet, handed me the hammer through the window and said: "Ready." I drove away.

Back to the wheel, back to the mountains and the roads. My lorry was carrying me--what did it care!..

That's how I found Asel and my son again. That is how we met and parted. All the way to the frontier and back I thought and thought about it. I was worn out with my hopeless brooding... I really had to leave now, to go for good, I could no longer stay there.

I was determined to do it, I quite made up my mind as I drove back to the depot. Going past the turning to the road-maintenance station, I saw Samat playing near the road with a little girl and another boy. They were building walls and sheep-folds of small stones: the game is called *tashkargon*. I may have seen them playing there before... I have been driving past my own son almost every day and never knew it... I stopped.

"Hello, Samat," I called. I wanted to have a look at him. The three of them raced to the lorry.

"Have you come to take us for a ride, Uncle?" Samat asked.

"Sure, I'll take you for a little ride."

The kids piled into the cab.

"This uncle is our friend," Samat boasted to his chums.

It was only a very short ride, and I'm sure I got more pleasure and happiness out of it than the kids.

"Now run home," I said, opening the door for

them. They jumped down to the ground, I got out too and held Samat back.

"Wait, Samat, I want to tell you something," I said.

I picked him up, held him high over my head, looked long and hard into my son's face, and before putting him down I kissed and hugged him.

"Where's the sword, Uncle? Have you brought it?" Samat asked, remembering.

"What a shame! I forgot to bring it, sonny. I'll have it with me next time I come," I promised.

"You won't forget, will you, Uncle? This is where we always play."

"Good. Now run after the others."

As soon as I reached the depot, I went into the carpenter's shop and made three toy swords. I took them along the next day.

The three kids were there waiting for me. I gave them a ride again. And that is how I made friends with my son and his chums. It did not take them long to get used to me. When they saw me coming they would race one another to the road shouting. "It's our lorry! Our lorry's coming!"

I came back to life. I felt like a human being again. I started on my daily trips with a light heart, with a wonderful feeling. I knew that my son would be waiting for me on the road. I would have him sitting beside me in the cab if only for a couple of minutes. All I cared and worried about now was to get there in time to see my boy. I timed it so that I always made the pass in the daytime. It was fine spring weather, the kids were always out playing and I usually stood a good chance of seeing them. I was so terribly happy, I lived and worked for those meetings alone. But I had moments of panic. Did Asel and Baitemir know that I gave the children rides? Whether they did or not, they might forbid Samat to see me, they might not let him play near the road any more... I dreaded it, and in my heart I begged Asel and Baitemir not to do it, not to deprive me of those fleeting meetings at least. But

one day it did happen...

May Day was approaching, and I decided to give my son a present. I bought him a toy lorry that could be wound up. I was held up at the depot that particular morning and started out later than usual. I had to hurry to make up for lost time on the road and maybe that was why I was nervous, on edge, and worried for no reason at all. When I had only a little way to go I placed the parcel on the seat and tried to picture Samat's delight. He had better toys of course, but this was special--it was a present from a driver friend to a little boy who dreamed of becoming a lorry driver--when he grew up. However, Samat was not playing there that day. His friends ran to meet me, and I got out of the cab.

"Where's Samat?" I asked.

"At home. He's sick," the boy answered.

"He is?"

"No, he's not sick at all," the girl volunteered with a knowing look. "His mother won't let him play here any more."

"But why?"

"I don't know why. He's not allowed, that's all."

Well, that was that. It was all over.

"Here, give this to Samat," I handed the parcel to the boy, but then I changed my mind. "No, don't," I said taking it back. I walked to my lorry feeling pretty low.

"Why won't Uncle take us for a ride?" the boy asked his sister.

"Uncle's sick," she replied gravely.

She said it. I had never felt more sick and broken up before. How could Asel be so hard on me? All right, I had been a rotten husband, but surely she could have a drop of feeling left for me, even if it were no more than pity? No, I could not believe it. It was not like Asel, something else was behind it. But what? How could I know... I tried to persuade myself that Samat was really ill, I had no reason to disbelieve

his friend. And now I became so convinced that he really was ill that I saw terrible pictures of him tossing in delirium. Supposing he needed help, supposing he needed some medicine urgently, supposing they had no car to take him to the hospital? After all, they lived up in the mountains and not in the centre of a city. I was crazed with worry. I raced back with no definite plan of action in my mind, all I knew was that I had to see my son at once, now... I wanted to believe that I would see him, my heart told me I would. As bad luck would have it, I ran out of petrol and had to stop at the filling station...

* * *

Ilyas fell silent. Rubbing his flushed face with the palm of his hand, he heaved a sigh laden with sorrow, then pushed up the window as far as it would go and lit another of his countless cigarettes.

It was long past midnight. But for us two, all the passengers on that train were most probably fast asleep. The wheels rapped out their never-ending song. Through the open window I saw the summer night fading away and the lights of small stations flashing past. The engine droned sonorously.

"That was when you spoke to me, *agai*," and I refused to give you a lift. Now you know why," the man smiled wryly in answer to some thought of his own. "I left you at the filling station and then you overtook me in a Pobeda. I saw you... Well, I drove on, sick with worry. But my heart had not deceived me, Samat was there, waiting for me on the road. When he saw me, he ran out into the middle of the road shouting: 'Uncle! Uncle driver!'

"My little boy was perfectly well. God, was I relieved, I was so happy I wanted to hug the world. I stopped the car and ran to him.

" 'You are not really ill, are you?'

" 'No, Mummy wouldn't let me come. She said I mustn't ride with you again. And I cried,' Samat told me.

" 'But why did she let you come now?'

" 'Because Daddy said that if someone wanted to take us for rides, let him.'

" 'He said that?'

" 'And I said I was going to be a driver...'

" 'Of course you are, and a good one too! Do you know what I brought you?' I produced the toy. 'See, it's a lorry, the very thing for young drivers.'

Samat beamed.

" 'I'll ride with you always, always, won't I, Uncle?' he said with a plea in his eyes.

" 'Of course you will. Always,' I assured him. 'Would you like to come to town with me on May Day? We'll make the lorry pretty with little flags, and afterwards I'll bring you home.'

"It is difficult to explain now why I said that to him, what right did I think I had, and what is more why did I suddenly believe it could be so. But that was not all, I went even further.

" 'If you like it, you'll stay with me for good,' I proposed to my son in all seriousness. 'We'll live in the cab. I'll take you along on all my trips, I'll never let you go, never part with you. D'you want to come?'

" 'Oh, yes,' Samat cried eagerly. 'We'll live in the cab! Let's start right now, Uncle!'

"There are moments when a grown man acts as irresponsibly as a child. We got into the cab. I turned the ignition key irresolutely and pressed the self-starter. Samat was delighted; he pulled and tugged at me affectionately and bounced on the seat. We were off. That made Samat happier still, he laughed and chatted, telling me something about the wheel and the dashboard, and I laughed with him. I came back to my senses with a jolt. I was hot all over. What was I doing? I slowed down, but Samat would not let me

stop.

" 'Faster, Uncle, let's drive faster,' he begged. I did not have the heart to refuse the plea in his shining eyes. I put on speed. Just as we really got going I saw a steamroller working on a stretch of road ahead of us. The machine turned about and behind it I saw Baitemir. He was raking the tar across the patch. The sight of him startled me. I wanted to stop, but matters had gone too far--I had taken Samat too long a way from home. I crouched over the wheel and shot forward. Baitemir did not look up from his work; he took no notice of us with all those cars going past every minute. Samat saw him, though.

" 'There's Daddy! Let's take Daddy along, Uncle, shall we? Stop, I'll call Daddy.'

"I did not stop. How could I, what would I say to Baitemir? Samat leaned out of the window to look, and all of a sudden he got frightened. He burst into tears and screamed: 'I want my daddy! Let me out, I want my daddy. Stop the car, I don't want to go! Mummy!'

"I slowed down and came to a stop behind a rock where the road made a turn.

" 'Don't cry, Samat, please don't cry. I'll take you back in a minute, only please stop crying.'

"I tried to comfort him but he was so badly frightened he would not listen.

" 'I don't want to go with you. I want to go to Daddy! Let me out!' he screamed, banging on the door. 'Let me out, I want to go to Daddy! Open the door!'

"What an awful thing to happen!

" 'Please don't cry, Samat' I pleaded with him. 'I'll open the door in just a minute, only please don't cry. I'll take you to your daddy myself. Come on, let's go.'

"He jumped out and started running with loud wails. I caught hold of him.

" 'Wait a minute. Wipe your tears. You mustn't cry. Please, my own darling boy, don't cry. Hey, what

about your car, have you forgotten? Look!' I grabbed the toy and wound it up with shaking hands. 'Look, it's running to you, catch it,' the lorry ran down the road, bumped into a stone, overturned and rolled into a ditch.

" 'I don't want to look,' Samat howled louder than ever, and rushed away.

"A lump rose in my throat. I rushed after him.

" 'Wait, Samat, don't cry! Wait, I'm your... I'm your... You know...' but I could not bring out the words.

"Samat was running away, and now he disappeared round the bend. I followed him as far as the bend, and stopped.

"I watched him run to Baitemir and clutch at him. Baitemir squatted down and held him close. The child locked his arms about Baitemir's neck and peeped round at me, in fright.

"Baitemir took him by the hand, slung the rake on his shoulder, and the two of them started down the road--the big man and the little boy.

"I stood there, hugging the rock, for a long time and then I walked back to my lorry. I paused beside the toy car, lying wheels up in the ditch. I felt tears trickling down my face. 'Well, that's that,' I said to my lorry and patted the bonnet. It felt warm. There was something endearing to me in that warmth. My good old lorry, the dumb witness of my last meeting with my son..."

* * *

Ilyas stood up and went out into the corridor.

"I'll take a breath of fresh air," he said to me the door.

I remained in the compartment. It was almost dawn, pale streaks of sky flashed past the window.

The blurred outlines of telegraph poles could be made out already. We did not need the light now.

I lay there wondering whether I should tell Ilyas what was known to me but not to him. But he took too long coming back. And so I did not tell him anything.

* * *

It was after Ilyas had discovered the whereabouts of Asel and his son that I happened to meet Baitemir.

A delegation of Kirghiz road workers was going to the Pamirs, and I had an assignment from the Tajik central newspaper to write an article about these men.

One of the delegates was Baitemir Kulov, a front ranking road master, and my purpose in coming to the Dolon was to make his acquaintance.

However, we met by chance, and a very lucky chance it was for me. A road worker, waving a small red flag stopped our bus when we were somewhere up in the pass. There had just been a landslide, he told us, and they were clearing the road. I left the bus and walked to the place where it had occurred. The site had already been railed off with sturdy timbering. A bulldozer was pushing the earth and debris to the brink of the road and over. Men armed with shovels and beetles were working where there was not room enough for the bulldozer to manoeuvre. A man in a tarpaulin raincoat and high boots walked beside the bulldozer and shouted orders to the driver.

"A bit to the left. Give it another go. Now come closer to the timbering. Good! Stop. Reverse."

They were almost through, and a passage had been cleared. The drivers held up at either end hooted and swore madly, demanding to be let through, but the man in the tarpaulin raincoat ignored their shouts and went on working with perfect composure. He made the bulldozer go there

and back again and again, ramming down the earth within the enclosure. "That must be Baitemir, he certainly knows his job," I decided. I was not mistaken. It was Baitemir Kulov. At last he opened the way to traffic, and the cars and lorries continued on their way.

"What about you? Your bus has gone, you know," he said to me.

"I'm here to see you," I said.

Baitemir showed no surprise. "A welcome guest you will be then," he said with simple dignity, and shook my hand.

"I've come to see you on business, Bake," I said, using his pet name. "You know, of course, that a delegation of our road masters is going to Tajikistan?"

"I've heard about it."

"Well then, before you go I'd like to have a chat with you."

Stroking his brittle brown moustache, he listened to me with a deepening frown.

"I am glad you came, but I am not going to the Pamirs, so don't take the trouble to write about me," he said.

"But why? Is your work keeping you or is it something at home?"

"My work is the road. You've seen it for yourself. And at home," he fell silent and lit a cigarette. "At home... well, it's the same as with everyone else, of course, I've a family and things to do... Anyway I'm not going to the Pamirs."

I tried to make him change his mind, explaining to him the importance of having a man of his calibre among the delegates. Baitemir heard me out politely but remained firm.

I was terribly put out and angry at myself for bungling the whole thing. My professional instinct had played me false, my approach had been wrong. As a result, I had no story to take back, I had not

fulfilled the newspaper's assignment.

"I'm very sorry, Bake, I'll be on my way then. I'll get a lift."

Baitemir looked at me thoughtfully, with his calm, intelligent eyes, and smiled behind his thick moustache.

"City people are forgetting our customs. I have a home, a family, a *dastorkon* and a place to sleep. Since you've come to see me, you will leave my house tomorrow, and not before you have rested after your journey. Come, I will take you to meet my wife and son. You must forgive me, I have to make my rounds before it gets dark, I shan't be long. It's work, you know."

"Let me come with you, Bake."

There was a twinkle in his eye as he looked at my city clothes.

"It's hardly the thing for you to go tramping with me. We've far to go and the going is steep."

"Never mind."

We went together. He stopped to examine every bridge, every turning, precipice and overhanging rock. We naturally fell to talking. It's a puzzle to me to this day: what did I do or say to make Baitemir like me and confide in me? He told me the story of his life and the story of his marriage.

THE ROAD MASTER'S STORY

You asked me why I did not want to go to the Pamirs. I'm a Pamirs Kirghiz myself, but fate has brought me here, to the Tien Shan mountains. I was little more than a youngster when I joined the Pamirs road builders with many other Komsomol volunteers. We worked with a will, the young ones especially. And no wonder, for we were building a road right into the heart of the inaccessible Pamirs! I got to be a shock-worker, there were bonuses and honours, but that's

just by the by.

I met a girl there, on that job. I fell in love with her, I loved her with all my heart. She was both beautiful and clever. She came from a village to work in construction, and that was no simple thing for a Kirghiz girl to do in those days. It's not too simple nowadays either for a girl to take up an industrial career, as you yourself well know, we are still fettered by our ancient customs. Well, a year went by. The road was nearing completion. They now needed road-maintenance crews. Building a road can be done by mass effort, but maintaining it takes skill. We had a young engineer, Husainov his name was. He's still in the road business, a big executive he is now. We were friends, and it was his idea that I should go and take a course of training. I was afraid my Gulbara would not wait that long, I was afraid her parents would take her back to the village, but no, I came back to find her there, waiting for me faithfully. We got married and stayed on at the road-maintenance station. Our marriage was a happy one. And I've got to tell you that to road workers, who live up in the mountain passes, a happy family, a wife, mean much more than they do to anyone else. This I know from experience. And my wife had a great deal to do with my becoming so devoted to this work. Well, we had a baby girl, then another girl, and then the war broke out.

The Pamirs road was like a river in a downpour with people streaming down it to join the army.

My turn came too. We walked from the house to the road one morning. I carried the baby, while the bigger girl walked beside me, clutching my coat. Oh my Gulbara, my poor Gulbara! She carried my haversack and tried to appear calm, but I know how she must have felt about staying alone with two kids at the road-maintenance station up there, in those uninhabited mountains. I wanted to send them to the village to stay with my relatives, but Gulbara said no. She said they would manage, they'd be there waiting

for me when I came home. And then someone had to stay and look after the road... That last time, we stood on the edge of the road and I said good-bye to my wife and my children. We were very young then, Gulbara and I, we were only beginning to live...

I was in the engineer battalion. To think of all the roads, river crossings and bridges we built in those war years! There's no counting them. We crossed the Don, the Vistula and the Danube. Freezing in the water, or suffocating in the smoke and flames, with shells exploding all around you, smashing the crossings and killing men, you felt you could not stand it any more, you wished they'd hurry up and kill you and be done with it. But then you'd remember your family, waiting for you in the mountains, and you'd get double your strength back. Oh no, I thought, I didn't come all the way from the Pamirs to die here under the bridge! I'd twist the wire with my teeth to hold the supports in place but I wouldn't give up... And they didn't kill me, I got almost as far as Berlin.

My wife wrote often, she never missed the postman collecting the mail down the road. She wrote me in detail about everything, and about the road, too. She had stayed on as road master in my place. I knew how hard it must have been on her, it wasn't just any road, it was in the Pamirs.

Suddenly, in the spring of 1945, her letters stopped coming. I was worried, but I told myself I was at the fighting front where anything might happen to the mail delivery. One day I was summoned to headquarters. Sergeant, they said to me, you've done your share of fighting, take our gratitude and these medals and go home, just now you're needed there more. Of course, I was glad. I even sent a telegram home.

When I got off the train I decided not to report the military registration and enlistment office, there was plenty of time to do it later, but to go straight home.

Home! Home as soon as I could get there. A lorry picked me up and we started up the Pamirs road.

I wished I had wings, the going seemed slow after the fast Studebackers I had ridden in at the front.

"Step on it, brother," I shouted to the driver. "Squeeze all you can out of your old rattletrap! I'm on my way home!"

I was near now. My house was beyond the next turning. The suspense was too much for me. I jumped off the moving lorry, slung my haversack on my back and ran. Running fast I took the turning and ... I did not know the place. Everything seemed to be there: the mountains, the road, but no house. And not a soul anywhere. Nothing but heaped stones and rubble. Our house had stood at the very foot of the mountain. The valley is narrow there. I looked up at the mountain and my blood ran cold. It must have been a mighty avalanche. Hurtling down from a great height it had wiped everything clean off its path sparing nothing; it looked as if a giant claw had scraped the soil off the mountain-side and ploughed up a huge gulley far down into the valley. My wife told me in her last letter that there had been plenty of snow and then rains had suddenly begun to fall. The avalanche should have been blown up in good time and eased down, but it was no job for a woman...

Some home-coming, that. I had faced death thousands of times, I came back whole from that inferno, and they... they might never have existed... I stood there, paralysed. I wanted to shout, to scream so the mountains would quake... But I couldn't. Everything turned to stone inside me, I was no longer alive. My haversack slipped down my shoulder and fell on the ground at my feet. I left it lying there: I was bringing some presents home for my little girls and my wife, and on the way I had swapped my tunic for a bag of sweets. I stood there and waited, expecting a miracle to happen. Then I turned and walked away. Once I stopped and looked up: the

mountains seemed to be rocking, crowding together, bearing down on me. I screamed and broke into a run. Away, away from that accursed spot! It was then I wept...

I don't remember how or where I went, I only know that finally I came to the railway station. I wandered among the people there like a lost soul. Suddenly I heard someone calling my name. It was Husainov, demobbed and on his way home. I told him everything. "Where are you going now?" he asked. I had no idea. "That's no good," he said, "you've got to pull yourself together. I won't let you go wandering by yourself. Let's go to the Tien Shan mountains to build a motor road, and then we'll see.. "

And that's how I came to be here. The first years we were busy building bridges. It was time I settled down some place. Husainov was already working in the Ministry. He came to see me often, and advised me to go back to my old job of road master, but I didn't have the heart, I was afraid. At the construction site, with people all about me, my grief was easier to bear. But this was a lonely job, it might prove my undoing. I had not recovered, the past was too vivid. It was as if my life had ended there and the future held nothing for me. The thought of marrying again never crossed my mind. I had loved my Gulbara and my little girls too much. I believed that nothing and no one could ever replace them. And marrying just for the sake of living with a woman was not my idea of happiness. It was better to be alone.

Still, I agreed to take on a road master's job, to give it a try. I was put in charge of this section here, right in the pass. And it was not too bad, I got used to it gradually. Maybe it was because this is such a troublesome section, it's the pass, you know. But I liked it that way. Time took the edge off my pain. I had dreams, though. I dreamt I was standing there, turned to stone, staring at the place where my home had been and feeling the haversack slipping down my

shoulder... The morning after one of those dreams I would leave the house early and stay out on the road all day, until dark. All that time I was alone. True, I did wonder sometimes: "Perhaps you will yet find happiness?"

And find it I did when I least expected it, a difficult insecure happiness.

It happened about four years ago. My neighbour's mother fell ill, and the man just didn't have the time, what with his work and his large family, to take her to see a doctor. The old woman was growing worse with every day, and so I offered to take her in a lorry that had delivered something to us just then. The doctors wanted to keep the old woman in hospital but she wouldn't hear of it. She said she wanted to die in her own home. She told me she'd put the curse on me if I didn't bring her back. And so we drove back. It was already dark. A little past the trans-shipping base the driver stopped and I heard him asking someone: "Where d'you want to go?" A woman's voice answered something. The driver said: "All right, climb in."

A young woman carrying a baby and a small bundle approached the side of the lorry. I helped her up, gave her my place nearest the cabin where the wind was less fierce, and myself settled down in a comer.

It was terribly cold with a raw wind that went right through you. The child began to cry. She rocked it and cooed over it, but the baby went on crying. Something had to be done. I couldn't put her in the cab because the sick old woman sat there. I touched her shoulder and said:

"Here, give him to me, maybe he'll calm down, and you'd better slide down lower, you'll feel the wind less."

I put the baby inside my sheepskin and held him close. He stopped crying and fell asleep. Such a cute little mite he was, he must have been about ten months old. I held him pressed to my left side. And

suddenly my heart leapt and fluttered like a wounded bird. It was a bitter-sweet sensation, and I thought: "Will I never be a father again?" And the mite, he just nestled to me as if it were none of his business.

"Is it a boy?" I asked.

She nodded. The poor girl was frozen stiff, the coat she had on was pretty thin. I wear this raincoat in the winter too, on top of my sheepskins, can't get on without it in my job. With the baby in one arm I held the other one out to her.

"Pull this coat off me. You'll catch cold."

"Oh no, don't bother, please," she said.

"Come on, pull," I insisted. "It'll protect you from the wind."

She wrapped herself into my raincoat and I tucked it in round her legs. "Warmer now?"

"Oh yes."

"Why did you start out so late?"

"I had to," she answered softly.

We were driving along the ravine then, past the miners' settlement. Everyone was asleep, all the windows were dark. Some dogs chased after us, barking wildly. I sat up with a start: where was she going anyway? For some reason I had thought it was this settlement, there was nowhere to go beyond that, only the pass and our road maintenance station there.

"You're there, I suppose?" I said and banged on the roof of the cab. "It's a short way to the pass and the lorry is not going any farther."

"And what's this place here?" she asked.

"The miners' settlement. Isn't this where you're going?"

"Yes ... it is..." she said uncertainly. Then she quickly got to her feet, handed me my coat and took the baby in her arms. He started whimpering at once. There was something wrong here, she was in trouble. I couldn't leave her alone in the dark and in that cold.

"You've nowhere to go," I said bluntly. "Don't get

any wrong ideas. Give the kid to me," I practically took him by force. "Don't say no. Sleep the night at our place and then it will be up to you. That's that. Let's go," I called to the driver.

We drove on and she sat there saying nothing, her face in her hands. Perhaps she was crying.

"Don't be afraid," I said to her. "I'm not going to do you any harm. I'm a road master, Baitemir Kulov is my name. You can trust me."

I fixed them up at my place. There was a small spare room in the yard, and I made myself a bed there. Sleep would not come. I lay there puzzling the thing out, it worried me. Prying is not nice, I hate it myself when people pry, but all the same I had been obliged to ask her a question or two. She might be in need of help. She had answered stiffly, with reluctance. But I could guess the things she left unsaid. She was in trouble, and to her every word there were ten left unsaid. She had left home, left her husband. A proud soul, evidently. I could see she was suffering terribly but she would not give in. Oh well, everyone is free to act the way he chooses. She knew best. Still, I felt sorry for her, she was a very young woman, more like a slender young girl. She struck me as a gentle, understanding sort. How could a man let her go away? However, that was their own affair. I would put her in the first lorry that came along in the morning and say good-bye. I had had quite a hard day, and soon fell asleep. I dreamt I was going somewhere in a lorry with a baby under my sheepskin, nestling close to my heart for warmth.

I was up at dawn. I went on my rounds but came back very soon. How are my guests, I wondered. I lighted the stove and put on the samovar, taking care not to waken them. But she was already up and getting ready to leave. She thanked me for helping her. I refused to let them go without their tea and made them wait for it. My little fellow-traveller of the night before turned out to be a very amusing baby

boy, and it was pure joy to play with him...

"Where do you want to go?" I asked her when we were having tea.

"To Rybachye," she said after some thought.

"Do your parents live there?"

"No, they live in the village beyond Tosor."

"Oh, that means you'll have to change lorries to get there. Not too convenient, that."

"But I'm not going there. We can't go to my parents," she said with a pensive look at her baby. "It's our own fault."

I assumed that she had married against her parents' will. And so she had, as I was to learn later.

She wanted to go out and wait on the road, but I talked her into staying in the house because it was too windy outside for the baby, while I went and stopped a passing lorry.

I walked there with a heavy heart. I felt unaccountably sad and miserable at the thought that in a few minutes they would be gone and I would be left all alone again.

At first, there were no lorries going her way. And then I let one pass, I did not raise my hand. It frightened me. Why did I do it? And that's when the torture began. More lorries came, but I kept putting it off. Now, I thought, now the next lorry I'll stop for certain, but my hand would not obey me. No, that wouldn't do. She was waiting and relying on me. I hated myself, but it was stronger than I was. I walked up and down the road. I had no difficulty in finding pretexts and excuses: either the lorry had a broken wind-screen and it would be cold riding in the cab, or I did not like the look of the man at the wheel, a reckless driver or a drunk perhaps. The sight of lorries already carrying passengers made me want to shout for joy. Anything not to let them go now, not now, let them remain a little longer, five minutes longer... "Where can she go anyway?" I asked myself. "She can't go to her parents, she told me so herself.

And who'll take her in with a baby in Rybachye? The winter will kill him there. The best thing for them is to stay here. She'll live here a while and work her troubles out. Maybe she'll go back to her husband. Or perhaps he'll come and find her here..."

Maybe I should have let her come with me and sent her off. I went on like that for about three hours. I really hated myself. Enough, I'll bring her here and stop a lorry in her presence, I decided. Otherwise I'll never do it. I met her coming out of the house. She had done all the waiting she could. I felt ashamed of myself and I must have looked as guilty as I felt.

"Was I very long?" I mumbled. "There are no lorries going your way, or rather there are but they don't look suitable somehow. I'm terribly sorry ... don't think anything wrong... For God's sake, come into the house for a minute. Please do."

She looked puzzled and disappointed, but without a word followed me into the house.

"Are you just taking pity on me?" she asked.

"No, it's not that. You see... I am afraid for you. You'll have a hard time. What will you live on?"

"I'll get a job. I've worked before."

"Where will you get a job?"

"Some place or other. But I'm not going back, and I am not going to my parents. I'll get a job and live."

What could I say? She could not stop to think about anything just then. Her hurt and her pride were driving her on, it did not matter to her where. "I'll get a job and live"--it's easier said than done. But you can't force a person.

The baby stretched his arms to me. I took him and kissed him, thinking: "My sweet little one, I'll have to let you go now. You have become as dear to me as if you were my very own."

"All right, let's go," I said quietly.

We got up to go. I carried the baby. In the doorway I paused..

"You can have a job right here," I said. "You can

live and work here. There's a small spare room. Honestly, do stay. Stay awhile. It's never too late to leave. Think it over."

She would not agree at first, but finally I persuaded her.

And so Asel and her little Samat remained with me at the road-maintenance station.

The small room in the yard was cold, and so I insisted on Asel and the boy taking my room, while I moved my things to the small one. It did very well for me.

I was living a different life. On the surface of it nothing had changed, I was still alone, but I had come back to life, my heart had thawed out after its long spell of loneliness. Naturally I had not kept aloof from people before then either, but even rubbing shoulders with people, being good friends, working together, helping them and accepting their help, is not enough, there always remains a sort of void in your life that none of this can fill. I became terribly attached to the little chap. When I had to make my rounds I would wrap him up warmly and take him along, carrying him all day. I spent all my spare time with him. How could I have lived without them? I could not even imagine it now. My neigbours were good people, they were kind to both Asel and Samat. But who doesn't love babies? And Asel was so guileless and warm-hearted that she soon became one of us at the station. And it was also because of her, because of Asel, that I became so attached to the boy. Why conceal it, I could not even conceal it from myself no matter how I tried. I fell in love with her. I fell in love with her at first sight with all my being, my whole heart. All those years of loneliness, all the grief and suffering, all that I had lost, went into that love. But I had no right to speak about it. She was waiting for him to come. She never showed her longing, but when we were working on the road I saw how eagerly she looked at each approaching lorry. Sometimes she took the boy and

sat for hours on a roadside stone. But he never came. I did not know who he was and what he was like, I never asked Asel and she never told me.

The months went by. Samat was growing. He really was a bright and lovable child. Maybe someone had told him to or maybe it was his own idea, but he began to call me Father. The minute he'd see me coming he would rush into my arms, shouting: "*Ata! Ata!*" Asel would watch him with a dreamy smile. It hurt and made me happy at the same time. I'd gladly be a father to him, but what could I do?

That summer we had some repair work to do on the road. The traffic passed close to us. Suddenly I heard Asel call out to one of the drivers: "Hey, Djantai, stop, will you."

The lorry stopped with a screech of brakes. Asel ran after it, I could not hear what she and the driver were talking about, only her angry shout:

"You're lying. I don't believe you. Get going, get going this minute!"

The man drove off, and Asel dashed across the road and ran home. I believe she was crying.

I could not concentrate on my work. Who was that man? What did he tell her? All sorts of doubts and surmises crowded into my mind. When it got too much for me I went home, but Asel did not come out, she stayed in her room. Later that evening I went in to see her.

"Where's Samat? I haven't seen him all day."

"He's here," Asel answered in a crushed tone.

"*Ata*!" Samat stretched his arms to me, asking me to pick him up. I played with him and made him laugh, but she remained sad and silent.

"Asel, what happened?" I asked her.

"I'll have to go away," she said with a sigh. "It's not because I'm not happy here, Bake. I'm very grateful to you, very. But I'll have to leave, I don't know where I'll go, but go I must."

I could see that she really meant it. All I could do

was tell her the truth.

"I have no right to hold you here, Asel. But I'm not going to stay here either. I shall have to leave too. I've had to leave an empty place once before. Why go into explanations? You know how I feel, Asel. If you go now, for me it will be like that day in the Pamirs again. Think, Asel... But if he does come back to you and your heart bids you go, I shan't stand in your way, you will always be free, Asel..."

Holding Samat in my arms I went out into the road. I walked up and down with him for a long time. He did not understand a thing, my darling boy.

Asel remained, but I did not know for how long. What was she thinking about, what had she decided to do? Those questions worried the life out of me.

And then one day, at noon, I came home and what did I see? Samat was actually trying to walk. Asel was hovering over him to catch him if he fell. I stood and stared.

"Bake, look, your son can walk," she said with a happy smile.

Did I hear right? Did she say "your son"? I threw down my shovel, squatted on the ground and beckoned to Samat to come to me.

"That's the boy, that's my darling little camel, come to me, come, plant your little feet firmly on the ground, don't be afraid!"

Samat spread his arms wide, and shouting "*Ata*!" ran to me. I caught him, tossed him high up and hugged him hard.

"Asel, let's celebrate tomorrow," I said. "Make a string of white and black wool and invite the neighbours' children."

"All right, Bake," she said, laughing.

"It's got to be black and white wool."

I took my horse and galloped to my friends the livestock-breeders and brought back plenty of *koumiss* and mutton. We invited our neighbours to come to our small "hobble-cutting" festival the next

day.

I stood Samat on the ground, hobbled his legs with the black and white string, placed a pair of scissors beside him, and led our little guests to the opposite end of the yard.

"The first one of you to reach Samat and cut the string will get the first prize," I explained to them "The others will get theirs in turn. Get started, go!" waved them to a start.

With whoops and shouts the children raced to Samat. The string was cut.

"Now, my son, run!" I told Samat. "Children, take him with you."

They took Samat's hands and ran with him.

"People," I said watching them and not addressing anyone. "People, my baby colt can run! May he grow up to be a swift-footed stallion."

Samat trotted after the children, then he turned round called out "*Ata*!" and flopped. Asel and I rushed to him. When I was picking him up, Asel said to me for the first time: "My dear husband."

And that is how we became man and wife.

That winter, the three of us went to see Asel's old people. They were still very angry with Asel, but eventually they forgave her and gave us their blessing.

The years slipped by. Samat is now five. We live in complete agreement, and there is only one thing we never talk about, never mention. We never put it in so many words, but we have an understanding that for us that man does not exist...

But things do not always shape the way you'd like them to. He turned up one day, not so long ago...

There was an accident on the road. It happened in the middle of the night. My assistant, he's my neighbour, and I hurried to the spot on hearing the crash, afraid that someone might have been hurt. A lorry had run into the road posts. The driver was badly bruised, practically unconscious, and very

drunk. I recognised him but could not remember his name. He helped me out once, by taking my lorry in tow over the pass. And towing a lorry over the Dolon is no laughing matter, you know. It had never been attempted in these parts before. But that chap had daring and gumption, and he did get over safely. I liked him for it. I liked him a lot. Not long afterwards someone else got as far as the pass with trailer in tow, he almost made it but evidently something went wrong. The trailer got stuck in a ditch and he drove away, abandoning it there. I wondered at the time if it was not that same dare-devil, and I was sorry he had not succeeded. Before long, however, towing trailers over the pass became a routine matter. The drivers learnt how to do it, and a good thing it was too.

Quite honestly, I did not know that he was the man Asel had left. But I would have done the same even if I had known. I brought him to my place, and instantly the whole thing became clear to me. Asel came in with an armful of logs. At the sight of him she dropped the logs to the floor. But we all pretended we had never met before. I had to tread with the greatest care lest by some incautious word or gesture I should cause them pain or prevent them from finding one another again. I had nothing to decide. It was up to them: it was their past and their son, sleeping now in my bed, held close in my arms.

None of us slept that night, each one was busy with his own thoughts. I had something to think about too.

Asel is free to take her son and go. It is their right. She must follow the bidding of her heart and reason. And I ... what do I matter, it does not rest with me, I must not stand in her way...

He is still here, he works on this route. Where he has been all those years, what he has been doing, I don't know. But that's beside the point. It's their own affair...

* * *

His rounds done, Baitemir and I walked back to his place. Day was ending. A springtime, smoky sunset was spreading across the sky, enveloping the ice-capped summits of the Tien Shan mountains. Lorries sped roaring down the road.

"And that's how things stand now," Baitemir said pensively after a silence. "I cannot leave home now. If Asel decides to go, I want her to tell me so herself, let her go with a clear conscience and with my blessings for the boy. I could not love him more if he were my own flesh and blood, you know, yet I can't take him away from them. That's why I'm not going. The more so since it's the Pamirs. Naturally, I'm not telling you all this for your newspaper article. Simply as man to man...

IN PLACE OF AN EPILOGUE

I parted with Ilyas in Osh. He was going to the Pamirs.

"I'll try and find Alibek when I get there. I'll begin life all over again," Ilyas said, speaking his dreams aloud. "You may be sure, I'm not a finished man. With time I'll marry again and have a home and a family like every other man. I'll have friends too. The only thing I'll never have is what I have lost for ever and ever... As long as I live, until I draw my last breath, I shall remember Asel and all those beautiful things that were ours.

"The day I was to leave I went to the lake and stood on the rise above it. I was saying good-bye to the Tien Shan mountains, to Issyk-Kul. Good-bye, Issyk-Kul, my unfinished song! How I wish I could take you with me, your blue waters and your yellow shores, but I can't, just as I can't take the woman I

love with me. Goodbye, Asel. Good-bye, my pretty poplar in a red kerchief! Good-bye, my love, I want you to be happy..."